

# PROSPECTIVE ADOPTIVE PARENTS WITHIN PRE- ADOPTION SERVICES:

– An interplay of emotions  
and power in social interaction

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**Prospective adoptive parents within pre-adoption services:  
An interplay of emotions and power in social interaction**

Pia K Eriksson

ACADEMIC DISSERTATION

To be presented,  
with the permission of the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Helsinki,  
for public examination in Auditorium XII, University main building,  
on 12 November 2016, at 10 a.m.



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Mathilda Wrede Institute Research Reports 4/2016

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Layout: Gerd Strandberg-Andersson

Illustrations and cover design: Linn Henrichson

Printed by Oy Nord Print Ab, Helsinki 2016

Ab Det finlandssvenska kompetenscentret inom det sociala området (FSKC)

This publication is distributed by FSKC and also available in PDF at: [www.fskc.fi](http://www.fskc.fi)

Helsinki 2016

ISBN 978-952-7078-15-0 (PDF)

ISBN 978-952-7078-16-7 (HTF)

# Contents

Abstract	.....	12
Abstrakt	.....	14
Tiivistelmä	.....	16
Acknowledgements	.....	18
<b>1 Introduction</b>	.....	20
<b>2 Family formation through inter-country adoption</b>	.....	28
2.1 Finland as a receiving country	.....	30
2.2 Children available for adoption	.....	32
2.3 Pre-adoption services	.....	34
2.3.1 Adoption counselling	.....	36
2.3.2 Inter-country adoption service	.....	40
2.4 Prospective adoptive parents as clients	.....	42
2.5 Normative family creation through adoption	.....	44
<b>3 Theoretical perspectives</b>	.....	46
3.1 User perspectives and horizontal knowledge production	.....	49
3.2 Conceptualizing social life in an institutional process	.....	51
3.2.1 Power	.....	52
3.2.2 Strategic interaction	.....	53
3.2.3 Emotions	.....	55
3.2.4 Service satisfaction	.....	57
3.3 Reflexive and critical perspectives	.....	58
<b>4 Methodology</b>	.....	60
4.1 The FinAdo survey	.....	62
4.2 Statistical analysis of associations	.....	63
4.3 Narrative interviews	.....	64
4.4 Thematic narrative analysis	.....	67
4.5 Ethical considerations	.....	70



4.6	Reflections on validity and reliability	73
4.6.1	Quantitative survey data	74
4.6.2	Qualitative interview data	75
<b>5</b>	<b>Prospective adoptive parenthood</b>	<b>80</b>
5.1	Accounts of being on the threshold	83
5.2	Accounts of vulnerability and dependency	87
5.3	Accounts of agency in navigating pre-adoption services	91
5.4	Relationships in midst of support and control	95
5.5	Emotion and reason	98
5.6	The clienthood experience compiled	100
<b>6</b>	<b>Inter-country adoption and child protection</b>	<b>102</b>
6.1	Wanting a child or providing a home	103
6.2	Rights and justifications	105
6.3	From risk and normativity assessment to co-creation of needs	108
6.4	Looking back at the research process	112
<b>7</b>	<b>Conclusions and implications</b>	<b>116</b>
	<b>References</b>	<b>124</b>
	<b>Original publications</b>	<b>154</b>



## List of original publications

This dissertation is based on the following publications:

- I Eriksson, P. K., Elovainio, M., Mäkipää, S., Raaska, H., Sinkkonen, J. & Lapinleimu H. (2015) The satisfaction of Finnish adoptive parents with statutory pre-adoption counselling in inter-country adoptions. *European Journal of Social Work* 18(3), 412–429.
- II Eriksson, Pia K. (2016) Fear of loss of a wanted child: emotional accounts of Finnish prospective adoptive parents in pre-adoption services. *Adoption and Fostering* 40(3), 209–218.
- III Eriksson, Pia K. (2016) Losing control in pre-adoption services: Finnish prospective adoptive parents' emotional experiences of vulnerability. *Social Work and Society* 14(1).
- IV Eriksson, Pia K. (forthcoming) Putting one's best foot forward: Finnish prospective adoptive parents' strategic interaction in statutory pre-adoption services. Submitted to *Qualitative Social Work*.

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## **Abstract**

**Pia K Eriksson**

**Prospective adoptive parents within pre-adoption services:**

**An interplay of emotions and power in social interaction**

In Finnish society, family creation is usually considered a private matter, whereas child protection is considered a public matter. In the adoption process these two matters intertwine, and prospective adoptive parents face the tensions which arise from this when becoming pre-adoption clients in social services. The power dynamics between prospective adoptive parents as clients and the professionals in this process have rarely been of interest, despite power being an integral to social work. Furthermore, the emotions of encounters between clients and professionals in social work settings have largely been overlooked in research. Though professionals are important facilitators in making crucial decisions about the creation of families in the inter-county adoption process, the client-professional relationship has only been studied to a minor extent in this institutional setting.

This study consists of four original articles and a summary, and investigates the context of statutory pre-adoption services of pre-adoption counselling (assessment and preparation) and mediation in inter-country adoption in Finland as a receiving country. The study conveys the user perspectives of prospective adoptive parents and enhances the understanding of the institutional setting of pre-adoption services by utilizing the concepts of emotion, power, social interaction and service satisfaction. The study examines how prospective adoptive parents experience and account for statutory pre-adoption services from their client position, and how emotions and power intertwine in social interaction in the pre-adoption context. Finally, it contextualizes the experiences of prospective adoptive parents within broader social work and inter-country adoption discussions.

This study applies a broad methodological approach, using survey derived data (N=1451) and narrative interviews (N=19). The overarching theoretical perspectives are those of narrativity, a horizontal view of knowledge production, and a reflexive methodology. The survey data was analysed using logistic regression and content analysis, whereas the interviews were analysed by way of thematic narrative analysis.

The study showed that 81.7% of adoptive parents were satisfied with the pre-adoption counselling they had received. This service satisfaction was best explained on the interpersonal level in the relationship between client and professional. However, consequent analysis of the institutional setting indicated that stressful emotions are common among prospective adoptive parents. The findings suggest that an experience

of fear was connected with the risk of the loss of a wanted child through either rejection in the assessment procedure or a termination of the adoption process. A gatekeeping function of the professionals is seen to be present throughout the whole pre-adoption process, and a power asymmetry was perceived by the prospective adoptive parent through different controlling practices. In combination with a sense of loss of control in their vulnerable client position and a dependency on the system, emotions of anger and fear were also experienced. The study showed that prospective adoptive parents use different strategies in their social interactions with professionals to navigate this institutional setting. However, stressful emotions and the resulting strategic actions can pose a challenge to establishing a trustful relationship with professionals, which is important in terms of service delivery. Prospective adoptive parents balance their anxiety and hope in the process through their own emotional engagement, but the study also identified the professionals as key actors in diminishing stressful emotions in the setting. Two different but converging discourses were identified in the interview data, as an emotional discourse of “wanting a child”, and a cognitive discourse of “providing a home”. These reflected a difference in primary aims between the client and professional, and were further found to be influenced by the knowledge orders of adult-driven Western reproduction, and child-centered child protection.

The implications of the study suggest an acknowledgment of dependency, vulnerability and emotion among the prospective adoptive parents, as well as a need for client participation in creating a common understanding and a more dialogical set of practices. It further suggests a change from a professional risk-related discourse to one based on a co-operational needs definition. The pre-adoption process does not have the objective of providing children for adults, but rather aims to prepare and mediate for families who are ready to offer a suitable home for a child in need. Therefore, separate needs assessment and aims for the parties in pre-adoption services should be established, and defined separately from the whole adoption process. On a global level and as a social work practice, adoption services need to be brought closer to a child protection aim. This can be achieved by enhancing co-operation between professionals in the sending and receiving countries, so that the matching of future families is based on a true needs assessment of individual children, and in combination with a genuine capacities assessment of prospective adoptive parents.

**Key words:**

intercountry-adoption, pre-adoption services, prospective adoptive parents, clienthood, emotion, power, strategic interaction, service satisfaction

## Abstrakt

Pia K Eriksson

**Prospective adoptive parents within pre-adoption services:**

**An interplay of emotions and power in social interaction**

I det finländska samhället anses familjebildandet vara en privat angelägenhet, medan barnskydd är en offentlig fråga. I adoptioner sammanflätas dessa två. De presumtiva adoptivföräldrarna möter de spänningar som uppstår av detta i pre-adoptionsprocessen genom ett klientskap inom social service. Maktdynamiken mellan presumtiva adoptivföräldrar som klienter och professionella inom socialt arbete har sällan varit av intresse, trots att makt är en väsentlig del av socialt arbete. Vidare har emotioner mellan klienter och professionella i det sociala arbetets olika verksamhetsmiljöer ofta förbisetts i forskning. Trots att de professionella fattar viktiga beslut som påverkar skapandet av adoptivfamiljer genom internationella adoptioner, har relationen mellan dem och klienterna sällan varit i fokus i empiriska studier.

Den här studien, som består av fyra artiklar och ett sammandrag, granskar den lagstadgade pre-adoptionsservicen av adoptionsrådgivning (lämplighetsutvärdering och förberedelse) och adoptionstjänst i Finland, som ett mottagande land i internationella adoptioner. Studien förmedlar brukarperspektiv på den institutionella kontexten med syfte att fördjupa förståelsen för de presumtiva adoptivföräldrarnas upplevelser genom begreppen känslor, makt, social interaktion och servicetillfredsställelse. Studien granskar hur presumtiva adoptivföräldrar upplever och redogör för servicen pre-adoption från sin klientposition. Vidare analyserar studien hur känslor och makt sammanflätas i den sociala interaktionen i kontexten. Slutligen kontextualiseras dessa upplevelser inom bredare diskussioner i socialt arbete och internationell adoption.

Studien tillämpar en bred metodologisk ingång med syfte att fingranska upplevelser av klientskap inom den lagstadgade servicen pre-adoption. Datamaterialet består dels av survey data (N=1451) och dels av narrativa intervjuer (N=19). De övergripande teoretiska perspektiven är narrativitet, en horisontell syn på kunskap och en reflexiv metodologi. Datamaterialet från surveyn analyserades med logistisk regressionsanalys och innehållsanalys medan intervjuerna analyserades med tematisk narrativ analys.

Enligt studien är 81,7 % av adoptivföräldrarna nöjda med den service som de har erbjudits. Tillfredsställelsen med servicen förklarades bäst på den interpersonella nivån i relationen mellan klient och professionell. Vidare analys av den institutionella kontexten tydde på att stressfyllda emotioner är vanliga bland presumtiva adoptivföräldrar. Resultaten tyder på att upplevelser av rädsla är sammankopplade med en rädsla för att mista det önskade barnet genom ett

avslag i utvärderingsprocessen eller ett avbrott i adoptionsprocessen. Eftersom de professionellas portvaktsfunktioner genomgående är närvarande i tjänsterna före adoptionen, upplever de presumtiva adoptivföräldrarna detta genom kontrollerande förfaranden. Detta i kombination med en känsla av att förlora kontrollen i en sårbar klientposition och ett beroendeförhållande till systemet, framkallade också känslor som ilska och rädsla. Studien visade att de presumtiva adoptivföräldrarna navigerar inom den institutionella kontexten med olika strategier i den sociala interaktionen. Stressfyllda känslor och strategiska handlingar kan komma att utmana en tillitsfull relation till de professionella, vilken är viktig med tanke på tillhandahållandet av den sociala servicen. Presumtiva adoptivföräldrar strävar till att balansera ängslan och hopp genom sitt emotionella engagemang i processen. Utöver detta identifierade studien de professionella som nyckelaktörer i lindrandet av stressfyllda emotioner. En klyfta mellan emotionella och kognitiva utsagor i intervjuerna identifierades som två olika diskurser, en emotionell av att "vilja ha ett barn" och en kognitiv av "att erbjuda ett hem". Dessa stämmer överens med de primärt olika syftena för klienter och professionella i pre-adoptionsservicen. Dessa sammanfaller vidare med två olika kunskapsordningar: en av vuxendrivna västerländsk reproduktion och en av barncentrerat barnskydd.

Studien rekommenderar ett medvetandegörande av beroende, sårbarhet och emotioner hos presumtiva adoptivföräldrar. Utöver detta förespråkas en samproduktion av en gemensam förståelse och mer dialogiska arbetsmetoder. Vidare föreslås en förändring från en professionell riskdiskurs till en gemensam behovsdefinition. Eftersom servicen pre-adoption inte kan ha som syfte att förse vuxna med barn, utan att förbereda och förmedla lämpliga familjer till barn som behöver det, krävs en behovsdefinition separat för pre-adoptionsfasen, skild från hela adoptionsprocessen. På en global nivå och som en praktik inom socialt arbete bör servicen föras närmare en barnskyddsorienterad målsättning genom att förbättra samarbete mellan de professionella i de mottagande och sändande länderna. Detta kunde ske genom att sammanföra en äkta utvärdering av individuella barns behov i kombination med en genuin kapacitetskartläggning hos de presumtiva adoptivföräldrarna.

### **Nyckelord:**

internationell adoption, pre-adoptionsservice, adoptionsrådgivning, presumtiva adoptivföräldrar, klientskap, emotioner, makt, strategisk interaktion, servicetillfredsställelse

# Tiivistelmä

Pia K Eriksson

Prospective adoptive parents within pre-adoption services:

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Perheen perustaminen nähdään suomalaisessa yhteiskunnassa yksityisenä asiana, kun taas lastensuojelu on julkinen asia. Adoptiossa nämä kaksi kietoutuvat yhteen. Tulevat adoptiovanhemmat kohtaavat yksityisen ja julkisen välisen jännitteen tullessaan sosiaalipalveluiden asiakkaita. Vaikka valta tunnustetaan olennaiseksi osaksi sosiaalityötä, adoptionhakijoiden ja ammattilaisten välinen valtdynamiikkaa on ollut harvemmin tutkimusten kiinnostuksen kohteena. Aiemmissa sosiaalityön tutkimuksissa on lisäksi usein jätetty huomiotta asiakkaiden ja ammattilaisten väliset tunteet. Ammattilaiset ovat tärkeässä roolissa adoptioperheen luomisessa, koska he tekevät ratkaisevia päätöksiä kansainvälisessä adoptioprosessissa. Siitä huolimatta heidän ja asiakkaiden välistä suhdetta ei ole aiemmin juuri tutkittu.

Tämä tutkimus, joka koostuu neljästä artikkelista ja yhteenvedosta, tarkastelee lakisääteistä kansainvälistä adoptiota edeltävää adoptioneuvonnan ja adoptiopalvelun prosessia Suomessa. Tutkimus lisää ymmärrystä institutionaalisesta adoptiota edeltävästä prosessista tarkastellen asiakasnäkökulmasta tunteita, valtaa, sosiaalista vuorovaikutusta ja palvelutyytyväisyyttä. Tutkimuksessa tarkasteltiin, kuinka adoptionhakijat asiakkaina kokevat adoptiota edeltävät palvelut. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa analysoidaan sosiaalisessa vuorovaikutuksessa tapahtuvaa tunteiden ja vallan yhteen kietoutumista palvelukontekstissa. Lopuksi adoptionhakijoiden kokemukset on nivottu laajempiin keskusteluihin sosiaalityöstä ja kansainvälisestä adoptiosta.

Tutkimuksen metodologinen näkökulma asiakkuuskokemuksiin oli laaja. Aineisto koostui kyselyaineistosta (N=1451) ja narratiivisista haastatteluista (N=19). Teoreettisena lähtökohtina toimivat narratiivisuuden lisäksi käsitys horisontaalisesta tiedonmuodostuksesta sekä reflektiivinen metodologia. Kyselyaineisto analysoitiin logistisella regressio- sekä sisällönanalyysillä ja haastatteluaineisto temaattisella narratiivisella analyysillä.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittavat, että adoptiovanhemmista 81,7 % olivat tyytyväisiä saamaansa adoptioneuvontaan. Palvelutyytyväisyyttä selitti parhaiten asiakkaan ja ammattilaisten välinen suhde ja vuorovaikutus. Tarkempi analyysi viittasi siihen, että stressaavat tunteet olivat tavallisia adoptionhakijoiden keskuudessa. Tutkimus osoittaa, että



pelon kokemukset liittyivät toivotun lapsen menettämiseen, joko pelkona hylkäämisestä soveltuvuusarvioinnissa tai pelkona prosessin keskeytymisestä. Koska työntekijöiden rooli portinvartijoina on läsnä koko adoptiota edeltävässä prosessissa, adoptionhakijat kokivat tämän valta-asetelman erilaisten ammattilaisten kontrolloivien käytäntöjen kautta. Haavoittuva asiakaspositio ja riippuvuus järjestelmään aiheuttivat myös suuttumusta ja pelkoa. Adoptionhakijat käyttivät erilaisia strategioita luoviakseen tässä institutionaalisessa kontekstissa. Stressaavat tunteet ja strateginen vuorovaikutus voivat uhata luottamuksellista suhdetta työntekijän kanssa, mikä on keskeistä palvelujen onnistumisen kannalta. Adoptionhakijat pyrkivät oman emotionaalisen sitoutumisensa kautta tasapainottamaan huoltaan ja toivoaan adoptioprosessissa. Myös ammattilaiset avainhenkilöinä voivat lieventää adoptionhakijoiden kokemia stressaavia tunteita. Kuilu emotionaalisten ja kognitiivisten selonteokojen välillä näkyi haastatteluissa kahtena erilaisena diskurssina: tunteiden ohjaamana ”lapsen haluamisena” ja järkeilevänä ”kodin tarjoamisena”. Nämä diskurssit heijastavat työntekijöiden ja asiakkaiden erilaisia tavoitteita adoptiota edeltäville palveluille. Lisäksi ne heijastavat aikuisjohtoista länsimaalaista lisääntymispuhetta ja lapsikeskeistä lastensuojelua organisoivia tiedon järjestyksiä.

Tulosten perusteella tutkimus suosittelee adoptionhakijoiden tunteiden, haavoittuvuuden ja riippuvaisen aseman tunnustamista. Lisäksi on tarve lisätä asiakasosallisuutta yhteisen ymmärryksen ja dialogisempien käytäntöjen luomiseksi. Tutkimuksen mukaan adoptiota edeltävät palvelut hyötyisivät myös siitä, että ammattilaisten riskidiskurssista siirryttäisiin yhteiseen adoptionhakijoiden valmiuksien arviointiin. Adoptiota edeltävän palvelun tavoite ei voi olla lasten hankkiminen aikuisille, vaan perheiden valmentaminen ja sopivan kodin tarjoaminen sitä tarvitsevalle lapselle. Siksi adoptiota edeltävissä palveluissa tulisi tehdä erillinen tarvekartoitus ja yhteinen tavoitteiden määrittely erillään sen jälkeisestä adoptioprosessista. Globaalina sosiaalityön käytäntönä palvelut tulisi kytkeä tiiviimmin yhteen kansainvälisen lastensuojelun tavoitteisiin parantamalla ammattilaisten yhteistyötä vastaanottavissa ja lähettävissä maissa. Täten todellinen yksittäisen lapsen tarpeiden arviointi voisi yhdistyä rehelliseen tulevien adoptiovanhempien valmiuksien arviointiin.

**Avainsanat:**

kansainvälinen adoption, adoptioneuvonta, adoptiopalvelu, adoptionhakija, asiakkuus, tunteet, valta, strateginen vuorovaikutus, palvelutyytyväisyys

## Acknowledgements

*“The journey not the arrival matters.”*

*T.S. Eliot*

Research is like jungle trekking, mountain climbing, desert hiking and ocean crossing. Though the journey has been pleasant I am happy to have arrived. And what a journey it has been. When I set out on the quest I had no idea of what was ahead of me and how many people would guide and accompany me along the way.

Arriving here today, I have a long list of people I want to thank, since my hearth is filled with gratitude and pleasant memories. First of all I want to thank my supervisor Professor Ilse Julkunen for all support and help. Thank you for wise advice, for helping me to find my own way and walking beside me. Then I want to thank my other supervisor Professor Lars Uggerhøj for sharp comments and questions on my manuscript, always helping me to improve my texts.

I was privileged to have Professor Tarja Pösö and Professor Elsbeth Neil as external pre-examinators. Thank you for helping me to improve my manuscript through encouraging and thoughtful feedback, which gave me strength to finish it. Further I thank PhD Kirsi Nousiainen for engaging and accurate feedback on my manuscript before the pre-examination. I also thank Professor Tommy Lundström for agreeing to act as my opponent at the public defense.

Fortunately, on this trip I was not alone, but I have been fortunate to participate in the Sosnet National Post-Graduate School for Social Work and Social Services in two subsequent groups. I want to thank the supervisors of the groups: Professor Aila-Leena Matthies, Professor Juha Hämäläinen, Professor Maritta Törrönen and Professor Katja Forssén as well as the post-doc supervisors PhD Elina Virokannas, PhD Satu Ranta-Tyrkkö and PhD Anu Muuri, for all your feedback and comments on my papers in different stages. Then I want to thank my fellow passengers “in the same boat” for peer-support, invigorating discussions and many laughs. Thank you PhD Heidi Ruohio, PhD Tarja Juvonen, Anniina Kaittila, PhD Maija Mäntttäri-van der Kuip, PhD Hanna Kara, Anna Nikupeteri, Enni Mikkonen, and Andreas Baldschun among others. Further I want to thank my fellow doctoral students at University of Helsinki: Katarina Fagerström, Raija Koskinen, PhD Ann-Marie Lindqvist, PhD Harry

Lunabba, Johanna Björkenheim, PhD Camilla Granholm, Ylva Krokfors, and Marina Bergman-Pyykkönen, for support and many interesting discussions over the years.

I would also like to express my deepest appreciation to all my colleagues at the Mathilda Wrede-institute and FSKC through the years. A special thank you to Torbjörn Stoor and Gerd Strandberg for helping me with the publication of the dissertation. I would also like to single out Annette Tallberg, who helped me in transcribing part of the interviews.

I further thank the members of the FinAdo study group for co-authorship and collaboration. In addition to this I also want to thank Sanna Mäkipää for many insightful and inspirational discussions along the journey. Further I am grateful to Save the Children Finland ry., Interpedia ry., the City of Helsinki adoption team, Adoptioperheet ry., Yhteiset Lapsemme ry and Simpukka ry. for helping me with the data collection. And then of course I owe much to all participants in my studies. Without you the study had not been possible.

I am also thankful to all who have supported my dissertation financially: University of Helsinki, City of Helsinki, Ella and Georg Ehrnrooth foundation, Waldemar von Frenckell foundation, Oscar Öflund foundation, The Swedish Cultural Foundation in Finland as well as Sosnet.

Last but not least, thank you to all my friends for bearing with me on this journey, and for understanding my being unavailable at times during intensive work. I also want to thank my parents Kati and Sten, for supporting me in all my journeys in life. Thank you for always being there for me. And then to the part where words are not enough to express my gratefulness. Thank you my beloved husband Juuso for being there for me all the way, as a safe haven on an occasionally turbulent journey. Thank you for believing in me and loving me. And then our precious children, Filippa and Rasmus, constantly teaching me about life. Thank you for being you!

A sunny October day in Helsinki 2016

*“What we call the beginning is often the end.  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from.”  
T.S. Eliot*

# **1 Introduction**

Forming families and having children is usually considered to be a personal matter within the family, but through adoption, a new family is created with the assistance of the government. Since adoption aims to protect the interests and rights of the adopted children, the pre-adoption process in inter-country adoptions has become strictly regulated by legislation and international treaties. In this process, prospective adoptive parents become parents at an intersection of the public power of the welfare state and the private domain of family affairs. On the surface an adoption process may easily be seen as a bureaucratic, legal process, but it is one which is simultaneously very personal and emotional for all who are involved. This study addresses the lived experiences of prospective adoptive parents within the institutional context of statutory pre-adoption services in Finland.

Intercountry-adoption research is a broad, multi-disciplinary field. The most common research perspectives within it have focused on a comparison between adoptees and non-adoptees, and often through their capacity for recovery and adjustment (Palacios & Brodzinsky 2010). The international literature is extensive, but in Finland this line of study encompasses recent studies on attachment disorders (Raaska 2015; Raaska et al. 2015; Elovainio et al. 2015), and their associations with learning difficulties (Raaska et al. 2012a), language difficulties (Raaska et al. 2013) and experiences of school bullying (Raaska et al. 2012b). Earlier psychiatric and psychological studies by Varilo (1993) and Lahti (1991) focused on outcomes in domestic adoption. In Finland, inter-country adoption research has also focused on adopted children's health (Lapinleimu et al. 2012), adoptee identity, belonging and experiences of racialization (Koskinen 2015; Ruohio 2016, 2014; Rastas 2002, 2005, 2009), single adoptive motherhood (Sukula 2009), biological mother perspectives (Högbacka 2012; 2014), post-adoption depression among adoptive mothers (Mäkipää 2014), and the language development of adopted children (Kaivosoja-Jukkola 2014).

International focus in adoption research has mainly centred on the three immediate parties in adoption: the child, the biological parent(s) and the adoptive parent(s), which is also called the 'adoption triad' (Kirk 1964). In general, social science research concerning adoptions is relatively new and according to Engel, Phillips and Dellacava (2007) the lack of this perspective has led to both theory and research concentrating mostly on individual and family levels. Within these levels, less attention has been paid to what Palacios (2009) calls the exosystem which exists around the triad. Especially, there is a lack of research on the services and the professionals that make decisions

and intervene along the process of creating an adoptive family (Willing, Fronke & Cuthbert 2012; Palacios 2012; Palacios & Brodzinsky 2010; Miller Wroebe & Neil 2009; Dickens 2009). According to Crea (2012) experts agree on adoption disruptions being complex and influenced by many factors, but that problems in professional practices such as the pre-adoption preparation and assessment are major contributing factors in inter-country adoption interruptions (Palacios, Sánchez-Sandoval & Esperanza 2005; Palacios 2012; Ruggerio & Johnson 2009). Kalland and Sinkkonen (2001) also found that the preparation and support of foster families was positively associated with a desired permanency of long-term foster-care placements in Finland, whereas in Sweden Khoo and Skog (2014) also concluded that foster placement breakdown often was associated with a lack in knowledge about the child's needs. The services offered to families prior to the placement of a child into a family will influence the joint future of the family and is therefore a crucial area of study. Still there is scarce research on the pre-adoption phase.

The focus in this study is on statutory pre-adoption services offered to prospective adoptive parents by social services and adoption agencies in Finland as a receiving country in inter-country adoptions. During the whole adoption process professionals are involved and perform critical tasks such as assessing suitability, preparing for adoption and matching future families. Noordegraaf, van Nijnatten, and Elbers (2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2010) have studied the practices of Dutch social workers in interaction with prospective adoptive parents in pre-adoption services through conversation analysis. Further some agency experiences on the adoptive parents' perspective (Gutter 1998; Tollemache 1998) as well as practical knowledge of adoption professionals have been documented (e.g. Crea, Barth & Chintapalli 2007; Eriksson 2007; Prochaska et al. 2005). Furthermore, Mäkipää (2006; 2007) has analysed the construction of adoptive parenthood in texts guiding professionals in pre-adoption services. All of these sources shed some light on professional practices in the setting. Some qualitative interview studies (e.g. Högbäck 2008; von Greiff 2004; Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell 2003; Sandelowski, Harris & Holditch-Davis 1991) have also touched upon (prospective) adoptive parents' experiences of the social services in the adoption process, though focusing more on the choices leading to adoption and the personal experiences of becoming adoptive parents in a broader sense.

The pre-adoption services, as social services, form an institutional setting with associated power dynamics. In social work and child protection, power is an

integral part of practices. An inevitable power inequality between the client and the professional has previously been acknowledged (Järvinen 2013; Appel Nissen 2007; Dominelli 2002; Healy 2000), and the tension between power as control and support has been empirically studied (e.g. Juvonen 2015; Järvinen 2013, Skau 2007; Mik-Meyer 2006, 2008) and with a focus on child protection (e.g. Dumbrill 2010, 2006; van Nijnatten 2010; Bundy-Fazioli, Briar-Lawson & Hardiman 2009; Maiter, Palmer & Manji 2006; Ryburn 1997).

Since social work clients are often at risk individuals or belong to disadvantaged groups in society, dependency is a reoccurring theme in social work (Fargion 2014; Uggerhøj 2014; Siisiäinen 2014). In social work in general, clients are usually seen as being in need of empowering and participatory actions in order to enhance democracy, and fight marginalization and social exclusion (Uggerhøj 2014; Siisiäinen 2014). In adoption on the other hand, prospective adoptive parents are seen as the most powerful party in the adoption process in relation to the child and the biological parents, and usually occupy powerful positions in society by way of their education and economic resources (Baden et al. 2015; Simmonds & Haworth 2000). As the prospective adoptive parents are a client group not traditionally seen in social work, the power relation existing between them and the professionals has scarcely been of interest. Since the child is not yet part of the pre-adoption services in the receiving country, an adult prospective adoptive parent may experience that a strong degree of control is exerted on them, and justified by the rights of a child who is still missing from the setting. Only in families where the biogenetic bond between parent and child is missing (completely or partially) does the state have the right to make an assessment of parental potential justified by the rights of the child: thus making adoption one of the few situations where potential parenthood is systematically evaluated (Lind 2008).

Family creation is usually seen as a private matter, whereas child protection is a public matter. In adoption these two processes meet. In society, the intrusion of child protection type services into a home where there is evidence of maltreatment or neglect is justified as a child is in danger (Hämäläinen 2011), whereas in the pre-trial assessment of adoption suitability, an intrusion of this nature might feel offensive. For some, the experience of being examined as a future parent can be unpleasant or awkward, since the pre-adoption process often is perceived as emotionally stressful, with feelings of powerlessness and a loss of control in a personal and important matter (Daniluk et al. 2003, Eriksson 2009). Simultaneously, the whole journey

of becoming an adoptive parent is long and emotionally challenging (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell 2003; Högbäck 2008; Berástegui Pedro-Viejo 2008). Prospective adoptive parents have their whole dream of a family with children at stake and might feel uncomfortable having someone else making important decisions which strongly influence their life (Eriksson 2009). Some prospective adoptive parents have already gone through infertility treatments where their privacy concerning family creation has been diminished. In these treatments, the medical professionals have functioned as evaluators of parental potential for a biological child (Malin 2003, 2006; Malin et al. 2001), and when these people enter pre-adoption services, they are once again assessed - this time for their potentiality for adoptive parenthood.

The issues of client dependency and vulnerability have been acknowledged in social work research, but the emotions of clients in their encounters and relationships with professionals have generally been overlooked (e.g. Gausel 2011; Thrana & Fauske 2014). The emotions of social workers have attracted more interest (e.g. Forsberg & Vagli 2006; Pinkney 2011) than those of their clients, and this has been looked at for example in contexts of child protection which is often perceived as distressing (e.g. Hietamäki 2015; Thrana & Fauske 2014; Platt 2012).

In the setting of adoption empirical research on the experiences of power dynamics and also the emotions of clients is lacking. Professionals working with adoptions need further expertise in the field of adoption, but there is also a shortfall in research on adoption practices (Miller Wroebel & Neil 2009; Crea, Barth & Chintapalli 2007; Crea 2012). This study contributes not only to the research community, but also to the improvement of adoption practices, as well as the 'adoptive family community' by analysing service satisfaction, emotions, social interaction and power dynamics in pre-adoption services from different user perspectives.

My interest in the field arises mainly from my professional experience. My research journey began ten years ago with a study where I documented the adoption knowledge and practices of 21 social workers (Eriksson 2007), and that further stimulated my interest in the perspectives and experiences of the client, i.e. prospective adoptive parents. Earlier in my career I had specialized in adoption and fostering as a social worker, participating in pre- and post-adoption services in both domestic and inter-country adoptions. These experiences have served as motivators for this study, and have inevitably also had some influence upon it. Furthermore, my own family history includes a (domestic) adoption triad, as my father is adopted, and both my biological



and adoptive grandmothers have been a part of my extended family. Against this backdrop, adoption as form of family creation is natural to me.

The formulation of the research problem was made based on my prior professional experiences. There was something about the adoption setting which involved several actors and presented paradoxes on different levels that bothered me as a social worker, and I felt that it called for closer exploration (Eriksson 2007). I was also driven by the fact that research was lacking in this area. My initial aim to enhance adoption practices has been of pragmatic interest, but another driving force has been a genuine interest in the experiences of prospective adoptive parents.

This study applies a broad methodological angle in order to scrutinize the institutional setting of statutory pre-adoption services from different angles. By way of analysis, this study aims to convey the user perspective and enhance our understanding of the prospective adoptive parents' experiences within the institutional setting of pre-adoption services. This is realised by utilizing the concepts of emotion, power, strategic interaction and service satisfaction. Furthermore, the understanding and description of experiences of the client position as a constant interplay between emotion, power and interaction on different levels, is contextualized and analysed in the context of social work and inter-country adoption, and serves to demonstrate its complexity. This empirical study based on narrative interviews (N=19) and survey data (N=1451) applies a reflexive and critical methodology. The overarching methodological framework is narrative inquiry, and combines qualitative and quantitative data. The four original articles all highlight different angles of the phenomenon, and utilize different conceptual frameworks. Three main research questions have been formulated:

1. How do prospective adoptive parents experience and account for statutory pre-adoption services from a client position in Finland as a receiving country in inter-country adoptions?
2. How do emotions and power intertwine in social interaction in this institutional context of pre-adoption services?
3. How can these experiences be understood from the perspectives of social work and inter-country adoption?

The first question is answered through subjective measures of satisfaction, and through the narrative accounts of former clients. The findings are reported in articles I-IV and

are summarized in chapter 5. The second question of emotion and power in interaction is answered in articles II-IV, and is further synthesized in chapters 5 and 6. The third question is mainly answered in chapter 6. The sub-questions of each research area are detailed in the separate articles which are presented in Table 1.

Article	Research question	Main concepts	Data
<i>The satisfaction of Finnish adoptive parents with statutory pre-adoption counselling in inter-country adoptions</i>	How satisfied are adoptive parents with their received pre-adoption counselling?  What explains adoptive parents' attitudes of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with received services?	Service satisfaction	FinAdo survey (N=1451)  open answers (n=999)
<i>Fear of loss of a wanted child: emotional accounts of Finnish prospective adoptive parents in pre-adoption services</i>	How is fear and anxiety of prospective adoptive parents present in the pre-adoption services?  How is this fear handled by the clients in the setting?	emotions (fear and anxiety)  emotional regulation  power (vulnerability)	19 narrative interviews
<i>Losing control in pre-adoption services: Finnish prospective adoptive parents' emotional experiences of vulnerability</i>	How do prospective adoptive parents perceive power asymmetry as clients in the institutional context of pre-adoption services?  How do they emotionally respond to this context of dependency and control?	power (controlling practices, dependency)  emotions (anger)  agency  client socialization	19 narrative interviews
<i>Putting one's best foot forward: Finnish prospective adoptive parents' strategic interaction in statutory pre-adoption services</i>	How do prospective adoptive parents as clients within statutory pre-adoption services engage in strategic interaction?	strategic interaction,  power (negotiations)  emotion (management)	19 narrative interviews

**Table 1** Original articles

In this summary chapter 2 presents the background contexts of inter-country adoptions and the statutory pre-adoption services for prospective adoptive parents. Chapters 3 and 4 introduce the theoretical foundations, conceptual frameworks, and methodological choices employed in the thesis. Finally, a summary of the individual findings of the sub-studies published in the original articles are presented in chapter 5, as well as a discussion and synthesis of the work in chapter 6. Chapter 7 offers conclusions which are drawn from the research, and proposes implications for practice and policy.



## **2 Family formation through inter-country adoption**

In Finland, adoption entails a legal “clean break” from the biological parents as the child is taken as being a full member of the adoptive family. Also, it entails the use of the term “strong” adoption where all (legal) ties are cut from the birth family (Adoption Act 22/2012; 153/1985). Adoption practices are mainly guided by the Finnish Adoption Act (22/2012) and the Adoption Decree (202/2012), as well as the Hague Convention of 29 May 1993 on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption and the national laws which apply in the different sending countries. An adoption becomes inter-country or transnational when a child is placed into a family across national borders. This phenomenon is not new, and it is estimated that almost a million children have been adopted transnationally since the Second World War (Selman 2009).

Western countries saw a rise in inter-country adoptions in the 1970s, which is explained by a concurrent decline in babies available for domestic adoption (Selman 2006). In the 1980s, 17–18,000 children per year were estimated to have been adopted over national borders (Kane 1993). In the 1990s, these numbers rose further to approximately 33,000 inter-country adoptions per year (Selman 2000; 2006; 2009). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after experiencing a peak in 2004 (over 45,000 children), the number of adoptable children worldwide has now declined, and in 2010 approximately 29,000 children were adopted inter-country (Selman 2012). The fluctuation in the global numbers of adoptions relate mainly to political, economic and societal issues which exist in the sending countries (Selman 2012).

In the early years, adoptive families were aimed to be as similar as possible to biological families, made possible through the matching of prospective adoptive parents and children. Childless young couples were seen as the most desirable adoptive family, and infertility became the most accepted motive (Berebitsky 2006; Kauppi & Rautanen 1997). Before 1970, adoptive children were often seen as substitute children for childless couples. Then, in the 1970s and 1980s a greater openness in adoptions occurred due to changes in cultural values and norms, and thus many families with biological children wanted to rear adopted children as a humanitarian act. Subsequently, people became gradually more aware of the needs of adoptive children, and also the challenges associated with inter-country adoptions. Meanwhile, the number of childless couples in the Western world started to rise, and the most common motive for adoption again became involuntary childlessness (Hoksbergen 2000).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the market economy started to intrude into the world of inter-country adoptions, and the demands of couples wanting to adopt have become evident. Already in the 1990s, Triselotis, Shireman and Hundleby (1997) stated that a period in which the forces of market economy played a greater role, had arisen. In public discussion, this has partially led to a shift in focus from the rights of the child to the rights of the adult to adopt. Adoption rates have been seen to decline roughly since 2005, and this is partly due to these demands and wishes of prospective adoptive parents not meeting the situation, or the needs of the children which are available for adoption. The characteristics of desired children are connected to more general societal norms about parenting (Högbacka 2008). As the demands for young healthy infants exceed the number of available children for adoption, waiting times become prolonged and are also insecure (Högbacka 2008; Selman 2012). It is evident that the current adoption market does not only concern individual need, but also questions of global, societal and political importance.

## **2.1 Finland as a receiving country**

Compared to other Nordic countries, Finland has a very modest number of inter-country adoptions every year. But when looking at adoptions in ratio to population, Finland is among the largest receiving countries in the world (Mignot 2015; Selman 2014), although the country has a relatively short history of inter-country adoptions. The adoption rates in Finland have followed the global rise and decline of adoptions presented. Domestic adoptions have been undertaken for a long time, but mainstream inter-country adoptions with Finland as a receiving country have only been conducted since the 1970s. A few children were adopted to Finland during the 1960s and 70s, but between 1950–70 Finland was also a sending country (Pösö 2009) due to the lack of domestic adoptive parents and the desire of welfare professionals to place needy children in families. The number of children going abroad was small though, and the main receiving countries were mostly Nordic countries. However, a concurrent interest among Finnish families in adopting foreign children started to grow in the 70s, even though domestic adoptions were still common (Kauppi & Rantanen 1997; Pösö 2009).

In Finland, adoption has not formed a natural part of social work or child protection practice, nor has it featured prominently in its related research. Professional knowledge

has consequently developed independently, and in separate institutions specialized in adoptions (Pösö 2003; 2013). As very few children in Finland are adopted from care, adoption is not a given part of the knowledge base of child welfare services, unlike countries where adoptions are part of the domestic child protection system. In the Nordic countries, adoptions are mainly profiled towards inter-country adoptions, although Finland still has approximately 30–40 domestic baby adoptions each year (Official Statistics of Finland 2014b).

In Finland, changes to the adoption law that regulates inter-country adoptions were passed in 1985, which resulted in an increased number of children coming to Finland in the late 80s. In the 1985 law, pre-adoption counselling and a mediating service became mandatory. In law passed in 2012, the requirement for social workers to have adoption expertise in handling pre- and post-adoption services was included. In Finland, economic support has been made available since December 2002 to cover about half of the expenses incurred in inter-country adoption. This alone does not explain the rising numbers in adoptions at the time, but the right to this financial grant made the public more aware of inter-country adoptions.

	1985 – 2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
<b>Dominican republic and Taiwan</b>	7															
<b>South-Africa</b>		5	17	23	24	27	22	25	36	41	32	45	32	37	37	35
<b>Ethiopia</b>	176	4	11	6	7	5	15	13	14	16	10	10	3	3	3	1
<b>Philippines</b>			7	12	12	19	21	19	11	10	12	8	21	10	14	6
<b>Guatemala</b>	13															
<b>India</b>	90	6	1	6	8	15	4	9	2	7	3	7	8	8	7	4
<b>Kenya</b>											9	6	10	4	6	4
<b>China</b>	137	64	64	61	133	140	49	46	18	33	23	41	62	47	33	27
<b>Colombia</b>	305	43	37	37	22	20	18	14	17	11	11	7	8	2	16	5
<b>Poland</b>	18	1	5	1	2	2										
<b>Romania</b>	33	1														
<b>Sri Lanka</b>	43															
<b>Thailand</b>	253	36	45	64	36	42	37	27	24	31	22	8	14	15	15	9
<b>Russia</b>	451	49	53	26	41	35	50	20	34	36	38	31	17	15	10	
<b>Vietnam</b>	35															
<b>Estonia</b>	45	9	6	2	4	3	2	3	1	2					1	
<b>Bulgaria</b>																1
<b>Total</b>	<b>1606</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>246</b>	<b>238</b>	<b>289</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>176</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>160</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>92</b>

**Table 2** Inter-country adoptions to Finland, years 1985 – 2015 (adapted from Valvira 2016)

## 2.2 Children available for adoption

According to Cole and Donley (1990, 279), the values underlying contemporary adoption practices in the Western world are that “children are entitled to grow up with families and have at least one stable adult figure”, and when “the family of origin is unable or unwilling to care for the child” ... “adoption is the preferred means of substitute parenting”. According to the Hague Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption, for a child to become available for adoption, his or her background has to be thoroughly investigated and inter-country adoption should always be a last resort to be used when a home for the child cannot be found within the country of origin.

Even if the needs and interests of the child guide the inter-country adoption placement, the individual child is in fact invisible from the receiving country's perspective, almost throughout the entire pre-adoption process. During this period the professionals and clients in the receiving country know nothing about the child going to be placed in the family, and often the child has not yet been born when the process for selecting and preparing the prospective adoptive parents starts. Therefore the adoptive child to be is represented only by generalized knowledge about adopted children. Still, there can be no ‘universal child’, even if policy creates a set of “standard needs” for children, stemming from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Smith 2010, 102), and the sector's research and practice experience. In a situation such as this, the generalized needs of the child are according to the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen 2003) to be reflected in the professionals' work as a child's perspective, when the child itself is not involved as a direct party in the services. This means that the professional is to evaluate the decisions taken from the point of view of the child, and is hence advocating for the unknown child. For the future adoptive parents on the other hand, it means having a readiness to parent children with very different backgrounds and needs, given they will have no knowledge of the child to be matched into their family.

Most orphans in the world are not immediately available for adoption, live with one parent or the extended family, and over 95% of them are over 5 years old (Unicef 2004). In adoption settings, the demand for infants (Högbacka 2008; Selman 2012) exceeds the amount of adoptable children, thus the waiting times for these children



are extended. When the children available do not meet the initial expectations of the prospective adoptive parents, many face a voluntary or involuntary stretching of their preferences as to the child's age and health condition in order to become parents (Palacios 2009; McRoy 1999). The children available for adoption have often faced neglect, abuse, have an institutional background and physical or psychiatric special needs, as well as having undergone traumatic experiences (Howe 2009, 8; Kroupina et al. 2012). The profile (age, health) of these children has lately changed, and presents more challenging adoptions due to an increase in psychological or physiological special needs. More and more of the children are pre-schoolers and school-age, and this puts even more emphasis on the importance of ensuring suitability and preparedness for adoptive parenthood.

Table 3 shows the age of the children adopted to Finland from abroad since 2012. Further information is presented in Article I (table 1) of the health characteristics of children adopted to Finland between 1990 and 2007.

<b>Age of child</b>	<b>Year</b>				
	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>under 1 year</b>	12	13	11	9	<b>45</b>
<b>1 year</b>	54	48	47	32	<b>181</b>
<b>2-3 years</b>	70	36	49	24	<b>179</b>
<b>4-5 years</b>	26	29	23	18	<b>96</b>
<b>6-7 years</b>	6	9	11	8	<b>34</b>
<b>over 8 years</b>	7	6	1	1	<b>15</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>550</b>

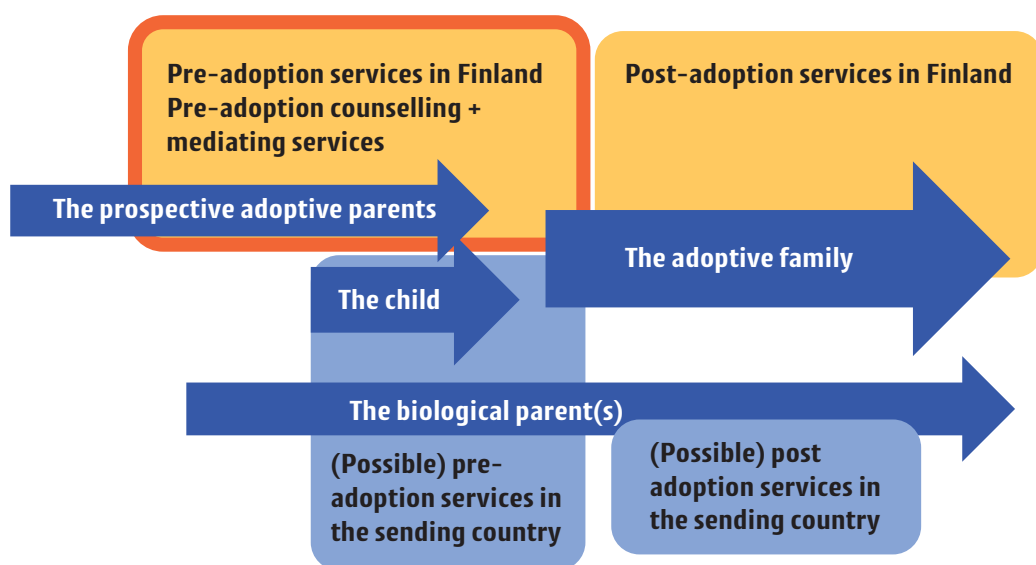
**Table 3** Age of children adopted to Finland from abroad 2012-2015  
(adapted from Valvira 2016)

## 2.3 Pre-adoption services

Pre-adoption services is about balancing the rights of all parties of the adoption triad: the child, the biological parent(s) and the adoptive parent(s). The child is the most vulnerable actor in the process, and children available for adoption are more vulnerable than the average child. Thus these children have a high risk of facing exploitation and abuse, and seldom have their voice heard. However, the process also has to guarantee the biological parent(s) of the child that the child's best interests prevail throughout the process. The assessment and preparation of prospective adoptive parents is justified by ensuring the rights of the child, and not even a child's acute situation gives reason to lessen this responsibility (Simmonds & Haworth 2000, 261–263).

In the adoption process, risks of fraud and misuse of a market driven inter-country adoption field occurs when moving children mainly from poorer to wealthier nations. Fraudulent practices in inter-country adoptions raise major ethical questions, and include for example forced relinquishment, child sales, child abduction as well as child production and harvesting, all of which constitute "child laundering" which is found in some sending countries (Rotabi 2012; Boéchat & Fuentes 2012; Smolin 2010, 2004). In striving to minimize these illegal practices, control is needed through international treaties, and the laws and practices of both the sending and receiving countries. However, for prospective adoptive parents, these measures can form into a system of burdensome bureaucracy and result in long waiting times.

Although the adoption process is a structure created to warranty the rights of all parties involved, above all are held the rights of the adoptable child (Hague Convention of 29 May 1993: Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption; UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 21); Finnish Adoption Act 22/2012). As every child has the right to a well prepared and suitable family meeting his or her needs, the preparation and screening of future parents are important tasks. This societal task of guarding the children's best interests is mainly conducted pre-adoption.



**Figure 1** Adoption services in the inter-country adoption process

Figure 1 illustrates how some of the adoption services are handled by the sending country (birth country of the child - highlighted in blue) and some by the receiving country (highlighted in yellow). As illustrated, the pre-adoption services for the prospective adoptive parents in Finland often starts even before the child is born. The practices and services offered to the child and biological parent(s) vary widely across different countries, but any detailed coverage of this falls outside of the focus of this study. In this study, the focus lies on pre-adoption services in Finland as a receiving country for the prospective adoptive parents, circled in red in Figure 1.

For prospective adoptive parents, the pre-adoption process includes the mandatory services of pre-adoption counselling (assessment and preparation) and the mediating service. These phases are different in character as the counselling service aims to assess suitability and prepare for adoptive parenthood and results in a written home-study report with an evaluation of suitability; and the mediating service forms a liaison between the applicants and the birth country of the child, during what is often termed the waiting period.

In contrast to the other Nordic countries, Finland also offers the statutory task of pre-adoption counselling through an NGO, although the prospective adoptive parents do not have the right to choose the service provider. Each municipality chooses how the legislated

service is offered to its inhabitants, and the users themselves cannot generally change service provider in the phase of assessment and preparation (pre-adoption counselling). The mediating service provider on the other hand is chosen by the user from among three possible organizations. The mediating service is also paid for by the prospective adoptive parents themselves, which covers the expenses of these non-profit organizations.

### 2.3.1 Adoption counselling

The criteria for adoption set by Finnish law (Adoption Act 22/2012) are that the adopter should either be a single person or a married couple. Furthermore, it states an age limit of the adopter adopting a minor between 25 and 50 years of age, with an age difference of 18-45 years between the child and parent. Only in special circumstances and in the best interests of the child, is a divergence from these limits possible. The Adoption Decree (202/2012) further states that a detailed dossier (home-study report) shall be compiled on the adopter, including as much information as possible and with relevance to the prospective adoptive parent's identity, his/her eligibility for adoption, background, family relations, social environment, health and the reasons for adoption, as well as the suitability of the adopter in terms of adoption and in particular inter-country adoption. The home-study report is to include the social workers evaluation of suitability with an assessment of their capacities for parenting a child of a certain age or other special characteristics such as special needs.

#### *Assessment*

Pre-adoption counselling is clearly legislated as a social service delivered by social workers (Social Welfare Act 1301/2014; Adoption Act 22/2012). For social work, the task of assessment and preparation is twofold since it involves both a gatekeeping and a supporting function. In Finnish municipalities, adoption counselling is usually placed organizationally within child protection units. Pre-adoption counselling can also be offered by Save the Children who are the only agency granted permission by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. In Finland, municipalities are responsible for offering social services to their inhabitants but have the option of either producing a social service themselves or providing the service through an alternative provider.

Thus, a contracted service provider holds the responsibility and tasks of statutory service provision. The role of Save the Children Finland is strong in adoption social work because of its history (Garrett & Sinkkonen 2003), with adoptions being an important part of the organization's work since the first adoption law was passed in 1925 (Kauppi & Rautanen 1997).

The pre-adoption assessment of prospective adoptive parents goes under many names in the adoption literature, such as assessment, screening and home-study. In the Finnish context we talk about pre-adoption counselling that includes both assessment and preparation as intertwined tasks. A home-study assessment can be compared to a family assessment, and the decision-making about "fitness" for guardianship which features in child protection services (Healy 2000, 74), but since the child is absent, it becomes an evaluation of parental potential instead of parental performance. Due to the absence of the child, the social worker utilizes discussions about hypothetical situations in the assessment process (Noordegraaf et al. 2008a). The assessment is mainly based on the verbal interaction and discussions which take place between prospective adoptive parents and social workers, as according to Holland (2000) and Triselotis, Shireman and Hundleby (1997), family assessments in general are the traditional selection and assessment processes, conducted through interviews with prospective adoptive parents. Noordegraaf et al. (2008a; 2008b) have demonstrated this intertwined task of gatekeeping and supporting in action through conversation analysis where the position of the social worker changes during discussions in the assessment.

Up until the 1970s, Triselotis, Shireman and Hundleby (1997) identify three different main tracks in the assessment and selection of adoptive families; the administrative view, the diagnostic or investigation method, and the scientific method. The administrative view was mostly based on set and easy to grasp criteria such as age, religion, socioeconomic status and personal preferences. The diagnostic method is based on individual and joint interviews with the clients that are evaluated according to their expected capacity to function as good psychological parents. This is mostly based on psychodynamic psychology and focuses on traits that are difficult to grasp and measure - for example emotional maturity, motivation, stability and quality of relations, an understanding of children, as well as personality. According to Triselotis, Shireman and Hundleby (1997), clients in the UK were not satisfied with the way that vague and implicit information was interpreted and evaluated. The alternative idea of a scientific method was to base the selection of future adoptive families on psychological

tests, but this was never used as a main method. The diversity of families and the differing needs of children make the scientific method almost impossible to implement, but it can help in finding e.g. psychotic tendencies in prospective adopters (Triseliotis, Shireman & Hundleby 1997, 140-141). Today in the UK, the main focus is on the preparation and not the assessment of future adoptive families. Also, a certain degree of companionship and collaboration between the client and the professional is called for (Triseliotis, Shireman & Hundleby 1997, 140-141).

In Finland, a mixture of diagnostic assessment and also the preparing method (as characterized by Triselot, Shireman & Hundleby 1997) can be seen in both the law (Adoption Act 22/2012) and the associated guidebook (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2013) for social workers, as well as in professional practices (Eriksson 2007). Today, potential parenthood is not only evaluated through measurable indicators of e.g. the potential adopter's socioeconomic situation or their experience of childcare, but also through the social worker's subjective evaluations of family relations, a capacity for reflection, and their emotional readiness for adoptive parenthood. In Finland, pre-adoption counselling has developed from an Anglo-American tradition with psychodynamic elements (Eriksson 2007) which in combination with the traditional motive of infertility, expected a change in the client through their acceptance of infertility and reaching an emotional level of readiness for adoptive parenthood (see e.g. Kirk 1964; Triselot, Shireman & Hundleby 1997, 43; Prochaska et al. 2005). This process of assessing prospective adoptive parents with a background of infertility was addressed by Crawshaw (2011), however the assessment and practices in adoption counselling in the 1960's (Mäki 2006, 143-146, 204) very much resemble those of today (Eriksson 2007) including the aim for a client's maturation into adoptive parenthood. An emotional maturation process supported by discussion, information and self-reflection is now expected. Emotional readiness includes making an informed decision, coming to terms with possible infertility, and having an understanding of adoptive parenthood being different to biological parenthood and the challenges and special needs of adopted children (Prochaska et al. 2005; Crawshaw 2011). The strive for reflection during this process can also be seen as a measure for reflective capacity, and which has been found to be important in parenthood (Brodén 2004; Fonagy & Target 1997) in identifying the child's individual needs, and the ability to tune in, understand and support him or her.

## *Preparation*

Adoptive parenthood differs from parenting a biological child in many ways. The background of the child influences the forming of the family, and thus parenting can be challenging. Accordingly, having an emotional readiness for adoption and knowledge about adoptive children can be seen as essential to adoptive parents. Earlier research has shown that adoptive parents are not always prepared for the challenges they face, and especially, parents feel less prepared for the child's emotional and psychological trials which commonly emerge post-adoption (Paulsen & Merighi 2009, 13). However, previous research also suggests that in combination with child characteristics, a parent's pre-adoptive preparation, knowledge and expectations are particularly good predictors of family and child adjustment post-adoption (Paulsen & Merighi 2009; Welsh, Viana, Petrill & Mathias 2008; McDonald et al. 1991; Mc Roy 1999; Sar 2000).

Even if most children adopted across national borders are well adjusted, they still tend to display slightly more behavioural problems than non-adoptees (Raaska et al 2015; Juffer & van IJzendoorn 2009, 2012; SOU 2003). Adoptees have also been shown to have lower levels of psychological health compared to the rest of the population (e.g., Juffer & van IJzendoorn 2005; Palacios & Brodzinsky 2010) and this is usually explained by pre-adoption trauma and separation. In addition to these, the challenges associated with identity in terms of both biological background and ethnical belonging (see e.g. Irhammar 1997; Koskinen 2015) require adoptive parents to have supportive skills.

The child always has a history of its own before joining their adoptive family, and these can cause family tensions. These issues call for an open communicative climate within the adoptive family and for the parental capacity of reflection. Attachment related issues can be a major challenge, and it has been shown that inter-country adoptees are at risk of forming insecure attachments if adopted later than 1 year of age (Juffer & van IJzendoorn 2009), and relatedly, up to 41% of Finnish inter-country adoptees have shown symptoms of reactive attachment disorder right after adoption as reported by their parent(s) (Raaska 2015, 34). The extra stability of adoptive parents is needed because of both the attachment challenges which occur due to difficult backgrounds, and also as the child should not be subjected to another rejection. In related literature, experiencing several separations has been found to be especially harmful in the lives of adoptees (Varilo 1993).

In Finland, the preparation of prospective parents is the responsibility of the social worker, so making the preparation part of the pre-adoption counselling. Since the two tasks of preparation and assessment are intertwined (Eriksson 2007), the aim of the service is to have cognitively but also emotionally well prepared adoptive parents who have made an informed decision to proceed with the adoption process. In addition to the statutory preparation, voluntary preparatory courses are arranged by non-profit organizations, as well as peer-support for prospective adoptive parents and adoptive families, but a deeper coverage of these elements falls outside of the scope of this study.

### **2.3.2 Inter-country adoption service**

After completed pre-adoption counselling and a written home-study, the inter-country adoption process continues with a mediating service as enacted in the Adoption Act (22/2012). The mediating organizations are non-profit organizations that are granted their permission from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and are controlled by the government. Finland has three organizations providing an inter-country adoption service: Interpedia, Save the Children Finland, and the adoption unit of the City of Helsinki. The mediating agencies cooperate with the sending country's authorities and those organizations which are accepted by the government. Through the service, children from abroad are placed in Finnish families. First, the mediating service assists prospective adoptive parents by applying for an adoption permit from the Finnish adoption board within the (Finnish) National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health. When a permit has been granted, the mediating organization gives guidance on the application process and sends the application abroad. The service then guides and supports the family all the way until the adoption is finalized. The responsibilities of these inter-country adoption services are stated in the Adoption Decree (202/2012) as providing information, assisting the prospective adoptive parents in the process, and assisting in uniting the family and finalizing the adoption. Since the service is not legislated as a social service, no formal competence or education of those working with the service is stipulated. Practically, workers have university or college degree educations, and some in the field of social work. Usually however, their knowledge about issues related to adoption is due to their specialization and their experience



in adoption work. The aims of the service - i.e. to ensure the best interests of the child and to support prospective adoptive parents, can according to its objective, be characterized as a social service.

During the mediating phase of the adoption process, the documents of the applicant are sent to the birth country of the child where the matching usually takes place. This waiting period often stretches over several years and can be filled with emotions of powerlessness, anxiety and even despair (Sandelowski et al. 1991; Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003; Högbäck 2008; Berástegui Pedro-Viejo 2008). As waiting without a possibility to influence the pace of the process is often felt to be stressful (Eriksson 2014), support and contact with the professional handling the case was seen as an important element in achieving a satisfying client experience during this period (Eriksson 2015).

## 2.4 Prospective adoptive parents as clients

Prospective adoptive parents in Finland have different motives for adoption (e.g. Högbäck 2008) and this study embraces adopters with a full range of motives. In Finland, 74% of the prospective adoptive parents applying for a permit to adopt from abroad in 2008 (82 % in 2009) did not have biological children (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2009; 2010). This indicates that the most common motive for adoption is childlessness, and to my professional knowledge only a minority of prospective adoptive parents choose adoption as their primary way to found a family, and the main instigator is involuntarily childless. Miettinen & Rotkirch (2008, 7) state that every fifth couple of fertile age in Finland faces involuntary childlessness. At the same time, inter-country adoption has been promoted by the media as an alternative way of starting a family (Engel et al. 2007), and the attitudes towards adoption are mainly positive.

Since adoption is rarely the primary way to start a family, the mean ages for adoptive parents are higher than those of biological parents. In Finland (2014) about 81% of women and 83% of men applying for permission to adopt from abroad (usually 1-4 years before actual adoption) were over 35 years old. In 2014, 48% of men were 40 years old or over and 38% of women (Valvira 2016). Still, as both involuntary and purposeful childlessness is rising, parents in the Western world are seen to be getting older. In Finland the mean age of women giving birth to their first child has increased from 26.5 in 1987 to 28.6 in 2014. The mean age of all parturients has for some time been steady at about 30 (30.5 in 2014). The percentage of women giving birth over the age of 35 was 9% in 1999 and 20.4% in 2014 (Official Statistics of Finland 2014a). The rise in the age of women giving birth to their first child is a common trend seen in European countries (Eurostat 2016). As the birthing ages rise and birth-rates decline, children are valued and there is still a great wish for having children among European populations (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 119; Miettinen & Rotkirch 2008). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) explain this trend of aging mothers as being due to the individualization of women. In Finland, having children is often postponed (among other reasons) because of the lack of an appropriate partner, for work or study-related issues, as well as a feeling of not being ready for parenthood and wanting to maintain a certain lifestyle (Miettinen & Rotkirch 2008, 91). The postponement of having children is one reason for the growing number of childless couples (Miettinen & Rotkirch 2008, 11).

In addition to generally being older than parents in general, research and statistics suggest that prospective adoptive parents also have a higher socioeconomic situation (van IJzendoorn et al. 2007; Hjern, Lindblad & Vinnerljung 2002). Interestingly however, the socioeconomic situation of foster parents in Sweden does not tend to differ from the national average (Andersson 2001), and this supports Dicken's (2009) claim that those who have sufficient economic resources often turn to the inter-country market to have a child. Because of these characteristics, prospective adoptive parents usually hold power in other areas of their life (Simmonds & Haworth 2000). Article I presents the first overall picture of both the characteristics of adoptive parents and children adopted from abroad to Finland in 1990-2007, based on my sub-study.

In the statutory adoption process, the prospective adoptive parents come to inhabit a position as clients in the domain of social services. In academic discussions about user participation, user involvement and user perspectives in social work, the term "user" is commonly used for describing the recipients of social services. Nevertheless, the term "user" gives an impression of someone who uses services without a dependency relationship with the provider. In adoption, service users are also often referred to as applicants or customers (in Finnish: *asiakas*). To refer to 'customers' of a social service is however misleading, since the service and service provider cannot freely be chosen (Printz 2003) and the word's connection to market ideology thus fits badly with the actual position. Furthermore, the customer in public services can for example be a child who does not have the means to claim rights (Ketola 1996). Also, the real customer can be the municipality who buys the service from a producer that then offers it to the user. The user is thus the recipient of the service. A relationship between a user and a professional or institution where there is an identified dependency and limited (or no) possibility for choosing the services is better understood through the more traditional term used in social work: that of the "client". According to Ife (2001, 168), the original meaning of a client was based on a voluntary contract, and is therefore far from the common usage in social work today. As the client does not have the right to choose either the content or delivery of the service provided in social work, Ife (2001, 168) argues that the word client has changed its meaning to reflect a dependent and relatively powerless position.

Therefore, in this study I use the term "user" when referring to the whole user group of prospective adoptive parents, but within the institutional setting the prospective adoptive parents are called "clients". I have deliberately chosen the term "client" in order to stress

the meaning that it has come to have in social work. This word is however solely used for the prospective adoptive parents as reflection of their position in the institutional context and not as a defining concept outside of this context. In my professional experience, many of the prospective adoptive parents do not feel comfortable in the client position and would rather call themselves customers or applicants. The positioning of the actors in the institutional context as client and professional is a choice I have made in order to better analyse their positions and the consequences that these have on the social interactions which take place in the setting. In a conceptualization by Alcabes and Jones (1985) I use later, the difference between a client and an applicant is the person's own willingness to be socialized into the client role.

## **2.5 Normative family creation through adoption**

Even if the view of families in our society has become more diverse, the adoptive family is still today as it was in the beginning at of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Kauppi & Rautanen 1997) depicted with the biological family as reference (Martinell Barfoed 2008, 121). According to Finnish law (Adoption Act 22/2012), both married couples and single persons have the right to adopt. Attitudes toward single parenting are historically more positive in Finnish society than in many other countries (Rantalaiho 2009), but society tends to create families with the nuclear family as the ideal, and hence domestic adoption is seldom an option for single adopters in Finland. Therefore, single adopters primarily turn towards inter-country adoption. According to statistics from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010), the percentage of single adopters between 1985 and 2005 was 9.8%. The number of single applicants clearly corresponds to the varying policies and restrictions of the sending countries, i.e. their possibilities to adopt. In 2002 a peak of 18.4% was seen due to good possibilities for single adoptions arising, especially from China. Up until now, single adopters in Finland have almost exclusively been female (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010; Valvira 2016).

Social work provides norms for human behaviour and accepted ways of living: “the normal family ideal, the healthy child, the perfect wife, and the proper man both inform ideas about ourselves and are reproduced and legitimated” (Parton 1999, 105).

According to Nousiainen (2004) phenomena that are marginal can carry more cultural meanings than normative ones, and this can be seen in adoption practices that reveal the ideal concept of family creation stemming from societal norms. Since suitability is based on potentiality, the screening of adoptive parents well reflects the society's view of accepted and wanted parenthood that is incorporated in the legislation, institutions and practices featured in the adoption process. Society defines the family norm, and this is stated in the legislation of both the sending and receiving countries. Adoption practices can therefore be seen as governing family creation in accordance with societal values of family constellations as resembling biological families.

# **3 Theoretical perspectives**

This study is located within the social sciences and adoption research, with its theoretical foundations in sociology and social psychology. Furthermore, the study is situated within the field of social work research.

The study builds on social constructionism as influenced by Berger and Luckman (1991) that according to Andrews (2012) makes no ontological claims but is an epistemological perspective, and something that criticisms often miss. The foundations for this study lie within the tradition of contextual social constructionism (e.g. Berger & Luckman 1967; Burr 1995) coming close to the view Elder-Vass (2012) as a constructionist realist approach. The social world is influenced by things beyond constructions, but my primary interest is not to access or catch these realities, but to understand and interpret personal experiences within a multidimensional interactional context.

I believe that social reality can be reached subjectively through the perception of people, and thus a knowledge of it is inevitably influenced by earlier experiences, knowledge and expectations (Rubin & Rubin 2012; Miller & Glassner 1998) on different levels. As this study focuses on human emotions, power perception and consequent actions, as well as attitudes (all of which are subjective), the lived experiences in this study are accessed through personal retrospective accounts. My methodological choices are twofold: subjective measures through survey and through narrative interview data.

Even though my study combines two very different sets of data and methodologies, I define my study as having an overall narrative perspective. The phenomenon of clienthood within pre-adoption services can be understood through narratives told by different actors to different audiences. From the user perspective, the quantitative survey data also constitutes an important piece in the prospective adoptive parent's personal narratives about their lived experiences, even if the survey data itself does not have the character of a narrative. Narrative inquiry is cross-disciplinary and a broad and scattered term for different methodological and epistemological approaches (Riessman 2008; 2002, 217; Riessman & Quinney 2005, 406; Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber 1998). When narrativity is embraced as an ontological perspective, the social reality is viewed as having a narrative character and taking the form of a story as how "life is" and not "how it was", i.e. "how it is interpreted, told and retold" (Bruner 1987, 31). People sort and express information, and construct their lived experiences narratively. This requires that they interpret, shape and reconstruct them in narrative form (Riessman 2008; 2002; Bruner 1987; Mishler 1986), and effectively express them in a process of "retrospective meaning making" (Chase 2005).

Psychologically oriented researchers such as Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) state that narratives provide understanding of the identity and the self-image of the teller, while more sociologically oriented researchers (e.g. Riessman 2002) claim that narrative analysis can provide knowledge about how the narrator constructs experiences from personal experiences and events. From this perspective, my study lies more within the sociological realm and sees stories as a gateway to acquire knowledge about personal experiences.

The methodological perspective of narratives is to be seen as one of many sources to gain access to knowledge about social reality (Johansson 2005). Earlier narrative research on parties in adoption has been conducted, e.g. by Sukula (2009) who analysed narratives about becoming and being a single adoptive mother through inter-country adoption in Finland with a critical family research perspective. In Sweden, Martinell Barfoed (2008) has researched into narratives of adoption expressed by adoptees and in newspaper articles.

A belief in knowledge as merely being a creation of the interactional context of the narrative interview is often not a fruitful enough base on which to build, and social constructionism has been criticized for being merely descriptive and lacking the potential to change the world instead of just describing it (e.g. Alvesson & Sköldberg 2000). This needs to be tackled in an institutionally, politically and societally embedded discipline as social work, and we need to believe that constructed knowledge is connected to the social world beyond the interview (Miller & Glassner 2004). Thus, the data collected from narratives is not an exact mirror of the social world, but the subjective accounts give us access to the experiences and the meanings ascribed to them by the participants in the study (Miller & Glassner 2004).

In this study, the combination of survey and interview data has to be addressed as quantitative research usually applies a more positivistic view, with the aim to measure an objective reality (Rubin & Rubin 2012; Holstein & Gubrium 2004). Teorell and Svensson (2007) claim the gap between the research traditions of qualitative and quantitative methodology to be an illusion on the epistemological level, and according to Alvesson & Sköldberg (1994, 11) it is the ontology and epistemology of a study that is crucial in a study, not the method per se. Quantitative research rarely discusses epistemological pre-suppositions, but usually assumes that language mirrors subjective experiences - something that qualitative studies often challenge (Miller & Glassner 2004). Nevertheless the dependent variables in the survey data used in this study consist of subjective satisfaction scorings and open answers giving a subjective view on service experiences, which fit well with a more constructionist perspective.



### **3.1 User perspectives and horizontal knowledge production**

In adoption literature and research, the adoptive child has been the main object of study and interest. In child protection on the other hand, a concern is that often the child is not acknowledged enough (Andersson 2000; Holland 2001). The vulnerability of birth mothers has lately been recognized (e.g. Cossar & Neil 2015; Roby & Brown 2015; Högbäck 2012, 2014), but there has seldom been focus placed on these actors in the time preceding an adoption, i.e. on the child to be adopted, on mothers to relinquish their child, or on the prospective adoptive parents. Accordingly, I have chosen the perspective of one of the parties involved in the adoption process, that of the prospective adoptive parents, since the services offered to the child and the biological parent(s) are not immediate parties in the pre-adoption services provided in the receiving country studied here. Thus, in my study of pre-adoption services, the adult prospective adoptive parents are referred to as the service users.

The user perspective is important in social work research, as the promotion of user participation in social work practices is reflected in Finnish legislation (Social Welfare Act 1301/2014) and in policy in the Nordic countries (e.g. Socialstyrelsen 2003; Laitinen & Pohjola 2010). However, user perspectives have been of less interest in adoption research and hence it has been chosen as the main perspective in my study. User perspectives give us knowledge that can only be offered by the users themselves (Mishler 1986). For this purpose, narrativity offers a powerful tool in conveying the experiences of the people (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber 1998). According to Perttula (2008), experiences can be knowledge, emotions, intuitions and beliefs, or even combinations of these that have been formed as a result of first hand experiences. The only way to study these experiences is through the person's own description of them, since they are not accessible through any other means than by their reproduction and expression (Perttula 2008, 139-140). Some empirical interview studies from an adoptive parent perspective in inter-country adoption have been conducted, but with other main focuses than the institutional process (e.g. Högbäck 2008; von Greiff 2004; Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell 2003; Sandelowski, Harris & Holditch-Davis 1991).

In addition to applying a user perspective, my view on knowledge is horizontal, meaning that the knowledge of users, practitioners and researchers is seen as being

equally important, but different and therefore complementary (Beresford & Evans 1999). Throughout the research process, these three different kinds of knowledge have been utilized. The theoretical foundations and methodology of this study has traits of practice research (Julkunen 2011, 2012; Uggerhøj 2011, 2012) and phronetic social science (Flyvbjerg 2012; 2001) that according to Uggerhøj (2011; 2012) “challenges traditional understanding of knowledge production” similar to practice research and is a “bottom-up knowledge production”. Furthermore, this is a study of a phenomenon from the inside out. In keeping with Flyvbjerg (2001), my approach focuses on small things in an attempt to reveal the major in the minor. The work is further inspired by Smith’s (2005; Campbell & Gregor’s 2004) institutional ethnography, and also by Foucault’s (1977, 1982, 1998; Gordon 1980) and Goffman’s (1959; 1961; 1967; 1970; 1983) writings that focus on the micro-level in order to access macro-level phenomena. This approach fits well with narrative inquiry (Riessman 2008, 194). In accordance with Smith’s (2005) thoughts, one should not replace the knowledge of the people taking part in the study by making them objects through an application of expert or academic knowledge, but rather one should try to access their own knowledge. Furthermore, phronetic social science (Flyvbjerg 2001) and practice research (Julkunen 2011, 2012; Uggerhøj 2011, 2012) acknowledges the possibility of also utilizing one’s professional experience instead of denying it or trying to capture it and leave it outside of the research process.

Some elements of user participation in the research process have been applied, as a user perspective can be seen on different levels and occur in different phases of the process (Beresford & Evans 1999). The initial planning of the qualitative part of this study was done together with representatives of a user organization for families that was one of the organizations helping me in recruiting participants for the interviews. The survey study was planned and the data collection carried out by the FinAdo study group<sup>1</sup> as a part of an extensive research project. Furthermore, the findings of both the survey and the interview study have been presented to audiences of service users, adoption professionals and academics throughout the research process and been commented on by them. In such way, a dialogue with both the adoptive parent community and the adoption professionals has been maintained throughout the process. One interesting issue with both the participants in the study and those taking

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1 Jari Sinkkonen (PhD), Helena Lapinleimu (PhD), Marko Elovainio (PhD), Hanna Raaska (PhD) and Sanna Mäkipää (MSc). The FinAdo survey was conducted in co-operation with Save the Children ry. Finland, Interpedia ry. and The Social Services department in the City of Helsinki.

part in the dialogue is that many occupy a dual role as an adoptive parent and/or an adoption professional, and/or a researcher. I myself occupy the double role of adoption professional and researcher. Many of the participants in the interviews had a high level of education and a capacity to reflect upon and theorize on their own initiative, together with me in the interview setting, and this was a fruitful situation. Although this might be uncommon in user research in social work, participants nevertheless are active in making meanings through their narrations in interview processes (Gubrium & Holstein 2004), and this can be seen as a rare advantage.

### **3.2 Conceptualizing social life in an institutional process**

According to the Thomas theorem: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas 1928, 571-572). People act upon their perceptions and understanding of a situation, and this perception will always differ when seen from different positions. In the pre-adoption services studied here, this means that the client and the professional in the institutional context are liable to interpret the situation and act from their own point of view. Hence I argue that one’s own interpretation of social reality is the most important one in explaining and understanding agency in social situations, and also in accounting for and acquiring knowledge about individual or group experiences.

In this study I access user perspectives of their lived experiences in the institutional context of pre-adoption services. In the initial phases of inductive analysis of the narrative data when no prior theory had been chosen to guide the analysis, the data was mirrored against possible concepts and theories for explaining the experiences of prospective adoptive parents. During the research process, conceptual and theoretical frameworks which offered new insights and knowledge about the studied context were crystallized into emotions, power and social interaction. All of these lived experiences are intertwined and made more meaningful with the value added and reflected in the retrospective accounts of satisfaction with a series of encounters within the institutional process, and which were measured through the survey. A further explanatory lens chosen for the analysis was one of ‘clienthood’.

To understand the experiences of prospective adoptive parents as clients, it has to be taken into account that all levels of social reality have an influence on complex experiences (Layder 2004). Social reality can be understood in dynamic and processual terms, and is constantly evolving and being shaped through social interaction (Emirbayer 1997). When studying interaction in an institutional setting, the forces of power also need to be addressed. According to Layder (2004), emotion and power are different sides of the same coin and are part of social interaction. The forces of emotion and power shape interaction in situated activity, such as that seen in the ongoing relationship between the actors in the adoption process. A sum of all the encounters, interactions and relationships is expressed in terms of satisfaction with the services which have been received. In the following these four main concepts chosen are presented.

### 3.2.1 Power

I embrace a relational view on power, in the vein of the work produced by Foucault. My choice of utilizing Foucault (1977, 1982, 1998; Gordon 1980) and Goffman (1983; 1970; 1967; 1959) as power theorists and to offer analytical concepts for analysing power is based on their view that power may be found within social relations, institutional practices and interactions which take place on a face-to-face level. In opposition to more psychologically oriented power theorists, Foucault argues that power is not possessed and exercised, but rather it is present in all social practices on all levels of society, and embodied in discourse and knowledge (Foucault 1982; 1977). Furthermore, power is neither an agent nor a structure, but present and negotiable everywhere (Foucault 1998, 63). Even if Foucault's writing on power fails in conceptualization (Fraser 1989, 31; Hörnqvist 2012), it provides a useful tool in analysing modern power in relations within practices (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen 2013; Alhanen 2007, 118), from the local micro-practices to broader societal dynamics. By studying established patterns we can reveal how people are governed through practices (Alhanen 2007, 128), and by analysing and questioning practices in social work we can enhance our understanding of the contradictory reality of social work, where truths are always relative interpretations (Juhila 2009).

In this study, Foucault's theorems are used to analyse the controlling practices of professionals as a manifestation of power perceived as either control or support. In these micro-practices power is made visible, and the most tangible contact the client has with the institution and the welfare system is through their relationships with the social worker and other professionals. According to Foucault, power is in our bodies, not our heads, and hence practices are perhaps more fundamental than beliefs in understanding the hold that power has on us (Fraser 1989). Through the lenses of micro-practices, it is further possible to make visible the power perspectives that lie in familiar activities and contexts that we take for granted. A Foucauldian perspective of critically approaching these practices does not aim to destroy them, but rather to redefine and reflect on how we act and what we know (Chambon 1999, 53). A common criticism of Foucault is that his theorizing leaves no room for agency, but according to Chambon (1999, 70) 'power through action' is to be found in counter forms or alternative forms of knowledge and practice. Foucault (1982) believed in possibilities for action and resistance through our capacities to recognize and question socialized norms and constraints (Alhanen 2007, 126), and this can be seen by examining the foundations that we have been socialized into, and to which we actively contribute on a continual basis (Chambon 1999, 54).

Previous qualitative research on power dynamics and the client's perspective on parental capability assessment and encounters with child protection services have been carried out (e.g. Dumbrill 2006, 2010; Maiter, Palmer and Manji 2006). Healey (1998) has earlier studied statutory child protection assessments with a post-structural approach. Additionally, the issue of power from a global inter-county adoption perspective (together with its influential market forces) has earlier been addressed (e.g. Fronek et al. 2015; Hübinette 2005; Yngvesson 2002).

### **3.2.2 Strategic interaction**

On a theoretical level, Foucault points out that power is anchored in interactions on the micro-level (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen 2013, 128) and operates in everyday social micro-practices (Fraser 1989). Goffman's perspective draws on the face-to-face level

in social interactions. As a micro-sociologist, Goffman is not traditionally regarded a power theorist (Jenkins 2008; Mik-Meyer & Villadsen 2013) and is more focused on the presentation of self in interactions with others (Jenkins 2008; Rogers 1977), however in pursuit of this line of enquiry, he also came to address power issues. Relatedly, strategic interaction is seen as a means of power negotiation in social interactions, and also makes it possible to detect the broader power dynamics which exist.

In the context of this study, Goffman offers concepts for analysing the interactions between professionals and clients on a micro-sociological, interpersonal level where the positions and power relations of the actors are constantly being challenged and negotiated (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen 2013, 129). Goffman (1959) was concerned with the face-to-face interaction as presentation of self in interaction. Goffman's (1983; 1990) concepts include theatre metaphors and dramaturgy, illustrating the interaction which takes place within different contexts. Goffman (1959) uses the term 'role' that advocates of for example positioning theory (e.g. Harré & van Langenhove 1999) have criticized for being a static term and argue for a more flexible concept of position. When combined with the constant interpretation of internal and external contextual factors such as emotions, cognition and the power relations which influence face-to-face interaction, Goffman's (1959) role concept becomes more flexible, especially in regard to the constant turn taking and repositioning that takes place within social interactions. I use both the terms 'position' and 'role' interchangeably and both are to be understood as flexible and context dependent.

According to both Foucault (1991) and Goffman (1961), institutions form people and their interactions into certain forms. Thus for example, rules and routines as well as the institutionally prescribed roles of client, social worker and professional are set, and the expectations which relate to these roles (Goffman 1959) are presupposed to some extent. In every institution there are official expectations about an actor's duties (Goffman 1973), and when taking on or being ascribed the role of a client, the front for that role is already pre-established. Foucault (1983) also argues that clienthood defines the client as being in need of help, and the professional as the person to provide them help and support. This social order is powerful and we try to maintain it by all means (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen 2012, 38). But always when observing a social institution, we will find a resistance to social orders - something that Goffman (1961) refers to as a "secondary adjustment" or a "hidden life". Whenever people are forced into certain expectations, they will adapt strategies to cope with it. I analyse this

situation as a form of power negotiation, and it is reflected in the different ways that clients navigate through the institutional context of pre-adoption services.

Interactionist frameworks such as those of Goffman can be criticized for a lack of conceptual relations to the society or the state, and this is due to a narrow focus on micro-interaction (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen 2013). However, studies conducted on a micro-level can give access to larger structural, social and political power relations (Mik-Meyer & Villadsen 2013; Juhila 2009).

### 3.2.3 Emotions

Goffman addresses emotional dynamics, but never developed a theory of emotions (Turner & Stets 2005, 30). Though Goffman (1967, 111) saw emotions as part of behaviour itself, his work on social interaction draws on solely a few emotions, and he was mostly concerned with the emotions of shame and pride (Scheff 2006, IX). This study deals with and utilizes a broader spectra of emotions in social life, and thus requires a broader theoretical perspective on emotions.

Different disciplines view the origin, display and universality of emotions in different ways, but most scholars agree on the existence of at least four primary emotions: fear, anger, sorrow and happiness (Turner, 2009; Kemper, 1987). According to psychological appraisal theory, emotions are not triggered in a mental vacuum, but their birth, interpretation and functional dimensions are always connected to an interaction between the person and their environment, and elicited by their evaluation of a situation (Lazarus 2001; Roseman & Smith 2001). Adding a sociological view (Turner 2009) on the emotions which occur in this study, the picture becomes even more complex, especially when emotions are seen as being relational, dynamic and situated processes shaped and defined in an interaction with the social environment. Emotions can hence be seen as an interplay between cognitive, motivational and physiological components, embedded in a wider cultural setting (Boiger & Mesquita 2012a, 2012b; Thoits 1989; Kemper 1990; Loseke 2009, 500-501), and should not be seen as an outcome, but more as actively shaping the interaction (Thoits 1989). Much of the earlier research on adult emotion is of an experimental nature (Mesquita, Marinetti & Delvaux 2012), and less empirical attention has been given to the dynamics of emotions in social and interactional contexts (Boiger & Mesquita 2012; Parrot & Harré 1996, 15).



In adoption research, emotion has often been seen from a psychological perspective (e.g. Brodzinsky, Schechter & Marantz Henig 1992; Verrier 1991; Brinich 1990), and mainly within the framework of loss. Therefore, the experiences of adoptive parents have often been interpreted in this framework. However, this individual-level view overlooks how the social setting shapes emotion (Hochschild 1998, 5; Loseke 2009, 499), and when studying emotions in social interactions and within a social context, a more dynamic approach to emotions is needed. Studying emotions as dynamic processes (Boiger & Mesquita 2012b, 237) in a complex social world is challenging, since emotions are fluid and every social interaction or event influences each other (Mesquita, Marinetti & Delvaux 2012, 300). Furthermore, the setting of the pre-adoption services studied in this research takes place within an institutional context, and as such, one's status in the social hierarchy or the interaction at hand also becomes an important factor (Clay-Warner 2014; Mesquita, Marinetti & Delvaux 2012), especially when adding considerations of power. Additionally, each culture has its own array of identified, accepted and expected emotions which can be expressed within certain contexts (Hochschild 1998, 7; Hänninen 2007; Heelas 1996; Loseke 2009, 500). These social and cultural dimensions of emotions are often overlooked, and given that emotions in our society are often regarded as psychological, intrapersonal phenomena (Loseke 2009), this calls for their further acknowledgement.

Most sociologists view emotions as socially constructed (Turner & Stets 2005, 2), which means that they are constructed in the situation of interaction (Harré 1986) and also in narrative. A purely constructionist view on emotions in relation to social reality is not sufficient. A strict social constructionist view on emotions where culture defines which emotions are acceptable and can be expressed, limits how they may be seen (Lyon 1998) since “forbidden emotions” become embodied by the individual and influence their social agency.

The analysis in Articles II and III focused on expressed emotions, and the cultural aspects and individual variations of these had to be taken into account, as well as the context in which the narratives were produced. Important is also that the emotions expressed in the narratives, and hence analysed, are memories of past events retold in the light of the present situation. Shame and pride are addressed as the most important social emotions (Scheff 2014; Goffman 1959), yet these are also hidden emotions (Scheff 2014) in our culture. Although these emotions might have shaped the narratives, they were not directly accessible in the data as verbal accounts.



### 3.2.4 Service satisfaction

When adoptive parents look back at the pre-adoption services in their adoption process and account for it, an evaluative component is often added. In this study the evaluative component of the lived experiences was operationalized through a retrospective survey with a satisfaction scoring of pre-adoption service experiences among adoptive parents. A satisfaction scoring as a subjective evaluation is based on all the interactions and relationships which have been experienced, and these experiences are intertwined with the emotions, power relations and negotiations that have taken place.

Support for social services and state interventions in welfare services has been found to be strong in Finland (Muuri, Manderbacka & Elovainio 2012; Olin, Pekola-Sjöblom & Sjöblom 2004), and research on service user satisfaction with welfare services has been scarce (e.g. Muuri 2008). Moving on from the levels of general attitudes and the image of services, to the level of actual experiences, this study explored levels of satisfaction with received pre-adoption services that have not previously been studied in Finland.

Satisfaction with health and social services is difficult to distinguish in terms of quality both on a conceptual and empirical level. Satisfaction can be seen as a short term evaluation of a service encounter, whereas a measure of attitudes towards a longer chain of service encounters lies closer to a measurement of quality (Taylor & Cronin, 1994). Since this study of received services is both long-term and retrospective, satisfaction is defined as an attitude towards the services received. Seen as an attitude, then satisfaction with the service has been formed based on the service experiences, but has also been modified over time due to different influences. Attitudes reflect how we feel about something or someone, and they predict our tendencies to act in a certain way. Attitudes mirror a general and stable feeling about an issue, one that may be positive or negative (Petty & Cacioppo 1981). The attitude of service users towards received pre-adoption services was measured through self-reported satisfaction.

### 3.3 Reflexive and critical perspectives

A reflexive methodology (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994; 2009; Alvesson & Deetz 2000) proposes interpretation and reflection with several layers. Firstly all references to data are the results of interpretation, and because of this the pre-understanding of the researcher and their theoretical assumptions are important factors to acknowledge. Secondly, a reflection has to be made upon one's own interpretations on different levels. In addition interpretation never happens in a vacuum, but is always politically and ideologically influenced (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994, 17), as well as being culturally embedded. Reflexivity operates as a meta-theoretical structure that directs the interaction between the interpretations made and the questions that are asked of them (Alvesson 2011, 13). A reflection can be seen as an interpretation of one's interpretations, as well as a critical self-evaluation of the interpretations made (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994, 12). Therefore the researcher reconstructs the social reality by their interaction with the subjects studied, and through their active interpretation and selectiveness in the analysis and reporting of findings, where some angles are chosen and others are left out (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2009; 1994, 13; Tavor & Timmermans 2014, 122). In addition to an active consciousness of one's pre-supposed stances, an acknowledgement of the influence of issues such as language might have on the interpretation is also needed (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994, 12).

This study grasps the prospective adoptive parents' complex experiences of pre-adoption services using several aspects of social reality. Theorizing should not be restricted to academic theories, but also employ other explanatory frameworks that may be useful to the case in hand (Tavor & Timmermans 2014, 43). As Fook (2001) argues, the lens constituting one's own experience and through which the self-reflective researcher sees the world is not only an instrument, but a source of data in itself. As such, this lens becomes important in identifying all aspects of a phenomenon (Fook 2001, 129).

Abductive reasoning in the research process contributed to understanding the complex experiences presented, drawing on both theory, literature and previous professional experience. Different kinds of knowledge have been utilized in searching for ways to derive alternative meanings. This is combined with a phronetic approach which claims contextually informed knowledge to be a vehicle for making generalizations which

extend beyond the specific cases in the data (Landman 2012, 27). According to Alvesson & Sköldberg (1994, 220), critical theory addresses the political dimensions of the study, as social science cannot stay neutral and objective to social phenomena. The focus chosen either strengthens or challenges these existing relations, taking dominating institutions and ideologies for granted. For example one can detect attitudes that cause locked or frozen social institutions and challenge them (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994, 212). According to Landman (2012, 27-28), narrative inquiry is a useful process in making visible how power is perceived, and the influence it has on people's behavior. This fits well with phronetic social science (Landman 2012; Flyvbjerg 2012) which also pays attention to power relations and offers a critical perspective.

## **4 Methodology**

This study relies on two different sets of data, one being mainly quantitative and the other qualitative. The two sets of data can be seen as complementing each other. The research design moves from a study on service satisfaction based on a survey methodology, to deriving a deeper understanding of the personal experiences of prospective adoptive parents through a process of narrative inquiry. The survey data offers a generalized broad perspective on the phenomenon studied, whilst the narrative inquiry gives a deeper insight of the user perspective (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach & Zilber 1998). In the research design, the quantitative survey data accounted for the first sub-study (Article I). In the lives of the adoptive parents, satisfaction scores form a retrospective view on their received services, and these were explored in more depth through the narrative data (Articles II-IV).

Four theoretical concepts were initially chosen to explore the experiences of the prospective adoptive parents' clienthood: service satisfaction, emotion, power, and strategic interaction (presented in chapter 3.2). Service satisfaction was chosen based on readily available survey data, whereas the following three concepts were derived through inductive readings of the narrative data. In the analysis, based on these conceptual frameworks new concepts arose as important in explaining and understanding the phenomena. These were vulnerability and dependency relating to both the situation and the relationship with the professionals. Also the concept of relationship arose in the analysis of service satisfaction and in the analyses of emotion, power and interaction. A further concept of agency was derived from the power dynamics: and was represented in how agency was perceived, and also how it was used as a means to navigate within the context. None of these concepts were used as theoretical frameworks in the initial analysis, but were achieved through abductive reasoning. Together, these concepts helped to explain and understand the clienthood experience of prospective adoptive parents. Findings were then compared with relevant literature in social work contexts (especially child protection) and then situated within broader discussions about inter-country adoption and social work.

When the findings from all sub-studies were synthesized, I noticed a gap between emotion and reason in the accounts of the participants which is interesting and worth elaborating on. This gap in the accounts was also an expression of how the two different aims of the client and the professional are balanced, and was also found to be in line with two current but different discourses present in discussions about inter-country adoption further elaborated in chapter 6.

In this study, both data and theoretical triangulation was applied (Denzin 1978; Patton 1999). Data triangulation was not applied in the initial analysis for the four sub-studies presented in the articles, but the different data sets were analysed separately utilizing different conceptual frameworks. Data triangulation was however utilized in the summary and synthesis of the original articles to grasp the complexity of the phenomenon being studied. Whilst this did not primarily strengthen the objectivity or validity of the research, it served to strengthen the research design as a whole (Silverman 2000). Triangulation should not be seen as an attempt to give a complete picture of social reality, but rather to offer several angles on the phenomenon (Silverman 2000; Layder 2013, 91), and in the context of this overall research, this aim has been achieved.

#### **4.1 The FinAdo survey**

The survey data used stems from the FinAdo study, which is the first extensive research conducted on children who are adopted across borders into Finland. The study was conducted in co-operation with Save the Children Finland ry., Interpedia ry., and social services in City of Helsinki, with an aim to study the development, health, and the psychological and social adjustment of children adopted from abroad. The data used in this study, forms a sub-study, and consists of parent reports from adoptive parents of minor adoptees under the age of 18 at the time of study. The questions in the survey analysed in this study related to the satisfaction with services that adoptive parents have received and used prior to the adoption taking place. This data was collected by way of two questionnaires as a small part of an extensive questionnaire battery. One parent questionnaire was completed by each parent, and one child questionnaire was completed per set of parents for each child. For the sample characteristics of the study, refer to Article I, table 2.

The survey was carried out between December 2007 and March 2009, thus making the study of the responses retrospective. The unique census covered every family that had adopted a child from abroad since 1989 through an authorised mediating organization. One questionnaire for each child under the age of 18 was sent out, and the final number of replies by adoptive parents was 1451, offering a final response rate of 55.7%.

## 4.2 Statistical analysis of associations

The retrospective survey measuring satisfaction with received pre-adoption counselling consisted of direct self-reports of satisfaction in the areas of assessment, preparation and follow-up. Furthermore, the parents had the possibility to give open answers or feedback regarding their satisfaction scores with the service. The number of returned satisfaction scores was 1451, and these were accompanied by a further 999 open answers which were also analysed. The association between the study variable of satisfaction and the background variables of characteristics associated with the family, the child and the service provider were initially analysed with chi-square tests, correlation analysis and a comparison of means. Logistic regression analysis was then used for exploring the associations with the background variables since the study variable had been divided to have a dichotomous outcome (Pallant 2010, 168) of “satisfied” or “dissatisfied”.

Content analysis (Silverman 2006) was applied to the open answers where the themes in the answers were coded and placed into categories inductively, but served to inform research on relevant elements relating to service satisfaction (e.g. Taylor & Cronin 1994; Winefield & Barlow 1995). These comprised of the interpersonal skills of the social worker, the social worker’s attitude and supportiveness, and the social worker’s knowledge and expertise, all as experienced by the respondent as a client. Additionally, the content relating to the service and its availability and accessibility was coded. For a detailed description of the coding process refer to Article I, table 1. The association between these categories and satisfaction were explored using a chi-square test for independence (Pallant 2010, 213-220). The computer software PASW 18 was used for the statistical analysis.

## 4.3 Narrative interviews

For the interviews, the participants were self-selected and recruited with advertisements through different adoption organizations and peer-support groups in the adoptive family community. In 2009 eleven women volunteered for interviews. These interviews were analysed for their general experiences of the adoption process and the emotional issues involved in the pre-adoption counselling process (as reported in Eriksson 2009; 2014). As no male adopters responded to the first interview call, in 2014 the data was then complemented with further interviews with men and also people who had faced a terminated adoption process, making the total of 19 interviews. Of these, 6 were adoptive mothers, 7 adoptive parents, and 6 women who had experienced a terminated adoption process.

I had little prior information about the persons I interviewed and did not specifically ask them about their background information. All of the information presented in the studies was gathered from the narrative interviews. The interviewees had either adopted a child from abroad 0.5-4 years prior to the interview, or had experienced a terminated adoption process. All of them came from different families. The shortest process lasted only a few years, whereas one process had started 14 years previously, had been put on hold due to the birth of a biological child, and was then resumed. The sending countries of the children either expected or adopted included Colombia, China, India, Kenya, Thailand, Russia and the Philippines. One family eventually adopted a domestic child. At the time of adoption, the age of the children ranged from babies up to 6 years. For further characteristics of the participants in the interviews, refer to Article II, table 1. In this study the participants in the interviews are referred to as both participants and narrators.

The decision to conduct narrative interviews was made since the approach sees people as experts in their own life and as interpreting subjects, rather than objects in the research process (Riessman 2002). Hence, this is a particularly useful approach when trying to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues involved (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). I conducted the narrative interviews with an initial period of narration, followed by a period of questions by the interviewer (Rosenthal, 2004). The triggering question was "Would you please tell me about your adoption process?". Thereafter, questions were asked about issues raised in their narrative, as well as questions about



different phases of the process, important events, their service experiences and their encounters with professionals. Some interviews consisted of long complete narratives, whereas others took the form of an informal discussion. Prior to the interview I had presented myself and informed the interviewees about my background as a social worker who had been working with pre-adoption counselling and post-adoption support in two organizations, as well as my engagement and interest in enhancing adoption services.

In narrative interviews Rosenthal (2004) sees the researcher's task as to listen attentively and support the narrator in their story, without interrupting. In that way the narrator's knowledge and understanding gains the position and space it deserves. I invited the participants to tell me about their experiences in their own words and encouraged them to tell me what seemed important and meaningful to themselves, striving not to lead them with my own pre-understandings. To this end, I had reduced a long preliminary interview structure into one generating question, and then a list of topics for follow-up questions. When I was planning the interviews I initially wanted to limit the narration to the pre-adoption period. However the closer I came to conducting the interviews and embracing a narrative perspective, it felt wrong to limit the narrators to my own timeframe of the beginnings and ends of their personal adoption process. Hence the interviews covered a time-period determined by the narrators themselves. In the analysis however, I narrowed the focus down to the pre-adoption phase of the adoption process. Through applying a clienthood perspective, the focus was further narrowed down to the institutional process starting when registration for pre-adoption counselling is made, and ending when the child is taken into their care.

The settings for the interviews varied considerably, and I recall some women meeting me in the middle of the day in the solitude of their homes when the rest of the family was away; one woman being on sick-leave, another taking a break during a hectic workday. One woman was crying over several cups of tea, whilst another was having a quiet moment while her toddler was napping. A few met me in my office in an informal room after work. One man met me in a quiet bar, a women met me for pizza at lunch, and another man was home feeding, soothing and carrying his baby during the entire interview. A few men chose to meet me in their own work offices. One man apologizing for smoking on the sofa in the family living room while speaking. One man was sitting by the kitchen table while his children and wife were playing in

the garden, and finally one woman was interviewed whilst her daughter occasionally peeked into the living room asking questions to satisfy her curiosity. The setting of the interview was however chosen by the respondent themselves. I offered a neutral and peaceful office space at my place of work, but many participants rather chose to invite me into their home, and a few respondent preferred to meet me in a restaurant or bar.

The interviews conducted in public places turned out to be some of the most sensitive and emotional. Possible interpretations for this could be that I might not have been let into the private sphere of their own home since the topic was sensitive. In a public space one always has the possibility to leave, whereas in one's home the researcher is an "intruder" in the same way as a social worker on a home-visit. Other possible interpretations were that the spouse of the person being interviewed was not aware of our meeting, or that the issues being discussed were not meant for their spouse to hear. For some however, it was a practical arrangement since many of the people interviewed had (adopted) children, which meant that the home was not always the most peaceful place to conduct the interview. Some of the interviews held in homes and in my office had only myself and the narrator present, and were both emotional and personal. Those conducted at the participants' homes with their spouse and possibly a child/children running around often turned out to be more 'polished' and rehearsed stories of the adoption process. The setting of the interview (in regard to place, mood and audience) undoubtedly affected the stories being told, but since the narrators themselves chose where to meet me, it was their choice that affected (consciously or unconsciously) the story they shared with me.

The narrative interviews were conducted by myself in Finnish (17) and Swedish (2) according to the participant's mother-tongue, and were audiotaped and transcribed. The consent of the participant and the individual sensitivity of every interview was considered, and influenced the choice of either transcribing it myself or using the help of a research assistant. The interviews lasted between one and two-and-a-half hours.

## 4.4 Thematic narrative analysis

As with the process of narrative inquiry, narrative analysis also has a diverse set of methods. In thematic narrative analysis, the story is kept intact but the focus is on the content, looking for themes across the narratives, and not on the process of the telling itself or the structure or form of the narrative (Riessman 2008, 53-58; 74). Narrative theorizing (narrative analysis) is made from the case, keeping the stories intact instead of segmenting them (Chase 2005, 663; Riessman 2008), and theorizing may also be conducted across cases as in paradigmatic theorizing (analysis of narratives: Polkinghorne 1995, 21). According to Polkinghorne (1995, 10) the analysis of narratives with paradigmatic reasoning builds conceptual networks across cases, and looks to establish relationships between the established categories. Valkonen (2007, 73) argues that the crucial methodological difference between narrative analysis and the analysis of narratives is that narrative reasoning interprets and finds implicit narrative structures created in the narratives, whilst the analysis of narratives is based on what is explicitly visible in the data. In this study both means of reasoning were utilized, and as Chase (2005) suggests, we can analyse dimensions across narratives, without losing the context within the narratives, and this was possible due to the limited number of narratives involved.

In narrative methods, the interpretation is central (Riessman 2002, 218), and thus ties it to the hermeneutic tradition. However, one does not look for a single interpretation of a narrative, but rather assumes that the narrative can have different interpretations. The knowledge we have about the world and ourselves is constantly being reshaped, and a narrative is an account told from one point of view in one situation (Riessman 2008, 187). Therefore the task of narrative research is to produce not one true interpretation, but an authentic range of perspectives of reality (e.g. Valkonen 2007; Johansson 2005).

The interviews were arranged to form a chronological narrative of the adoption process. Most of them started with the motives for entering the pre-adoption services many years before actually doing so, and ended in the present when the interview was conducted, and including the time after the adoption had taken place or after the process had been terminated. Firstly the narratives were individually analysed, making storylines and performing an initial coding of interesting elements

and their relations within the narrative (Riessman 2008). The narratives were also summarized around the thematic meanings which emerged, and these summaries were then used to bring the whole narrative back to mind, in forming interpretations of shorter sequences of the interviews, as well as being used cross-case in consecutive analysis. In finding common elements and theoretical frameworks to explain the experiences, the analytic reasoning was extended to cover the broad subject area being considered (Polkinghorne 1995). Later, when the data was analysed against the chosen theoretical frameworks, the completed narratives formed a picture of the contextual and social situations of the narrator. These were then utilized in the synthetic interpretation, and analysis was also made on the thematic sequences of data which were compiled (Riessman 2008, 74). The computer software Atlas.ti was used for the initial coding of the shorter sections of the narrative data. This was then complemented with more traditional cut-and-paste techniques in a Word processor during the later stages of analysis. The excerpts used from data were translated into English after the analysis had been completed, and feature in the appended articles.

Inductive reading and analysis highlighted the importance of both emotions and power, and theoretical concepts (emotion, power and strategic interaction) were derived from the data. According to Riessman (2008, 74), a thematic narrative analysis can also be guided by prior theory and so an abductive phase followed (Tavory & Timmermans 2014). In this approach, empirical data is worked with in relation to a broad and diverse range of theories and types of knowledge. The analysis proceeded similar to the coding process described by Tavory and Timmermans (2014, 54) from open coding to axial coding, where “promising” themes are coded across the data, the conceptual dimensions are identified and the variations accounted for. The analysis and coding was conducted simultaneously with the gathering of more data (Tavory & Timmermans 2014, 125), and hence resulted in slight changes being made to the additional questions in the interviews.

The sections of the interviews where the narrator talks about emotions or where the account was interpreted as carrying emotional content were coded in regard to corresponding emotions. These were each treated as equally important due to gendered (Fischer et al. 2004; Brody & Hall 1993) and individual differences in emotional experiences and expression. The accounts of emotional experiences were treated as analysis units (Riessman 2008, 60–61). The variation accounted for all of the primary emotions (sorrow, anger, joy and fear) and featured many combinations.

As the negative emotions were seen to be the most interesting and influential on the experiences within the institutional context, they were chosen for further in-depth analysis. This is supported by Kemper (1987) who suggests that negative emotions are the most influential in social interaction. As the concept of emotion is seen as being socially, contextually and relationally embedded, the complete narratives were kept attached to the coded excerpt throughout the analysis and used in the interpretation. The unit of analysis thus shifts between the excerpts and the complete narratives. For example the analysis of fear was made on the basis of explicit accounts of fear and also accounts that I interpreted as stemming from fear. These were then re-interpreted in the light of the whole personal narrative, for example in the light of infertility or hardships during the adoption process, and served as an interpretation of what the sense of fear might be associated with in that particular narrative.

Power was utilized as a concept in understanding and explaining the client position of the prospective adoptive parents, as well as its emotional consequences. It was conceptualized as controlling and supporting institutional and professional practices as perceived from the client position, and furthermore as power negotiations through strategic interaction by prospective adoptive parents in the institutional setting. This was achieved by coding the actions of actors in the context, and also by interpreting their associations to emotions and relationships in the setting, again taking into account the whole personal narrative. According to Landman (2012, 32), narratives offer the possibility to uncover subjective experiences and emotions in relation to power dynamics, and thus the “institutional constraints” described by Landman (2012, 32) have been analysed as controlling practices.

In the analysis of strategic interaction, the data was coded descriptively identifying all sequences of narrated actions or thoughts about actual, intended or considered actions of the prospective adoptive parents within the institutional setting. This was then followed by a coding which utilized the conceptual frameworks of Goffman (1959; 1970; 1983): dramaturgy, strategic interaction and expression games. Emotion and power were running as intertwined concepts through every analysis and constituted important interpretative frameworks throughout the study.

## 4.5 Ethical considerations

The main goals in ethical research are; voluntary participation (Silverman 2006; Rubin & Rubin 2012), which was attained through informed consent in both means of data collection; confidentiality which was pursued throughout the research process from data processing to reporting; and protection from harm, which was accomplished by sensitive evaluation of the person's situation, their capacities and needs during and after the interview (and also taken into account in the reporting). The FinAdo survey was further approved by the Ethics Review Committee of the Hospital District of South-West Finland as a medical study, and took all of these factors into account.

Taking part in the interviews was carried out on initiative of the participants themselves. The participants were told that they could refuse to take part or to answer, as well as being able to stop the interview if they wished (Rubin & Rubin 2012). The choice to conduct personal and narrative interviews was based on the sensitivity and complexity of the topic, since the adoption process can be perceived as a highly personal and sensitive issue, especially for those with a background of infertility or those who have been rejected in the adoption process. I believe I gained the trust of most participants since they talked openly about difficult and emotional things and referred to professionals by name, knowing that I probably recognized them due to adoption professionals being such a small group in Finland. Additionally, the community of adoptive families is also small, making adoptive families with children adopted from abroad a visible group, and which in-turn makes confidentiality important as the persons taking part in the study might know and have relations with each other (Holma 2005).

In social sciences, narrative research often focuses on persons belonging to minority or discriminated groups, whose stories and voices are not commonly heard in society (e.g. Larsson & Sjöblom 2010; Riessman 2002). One of the aims of narrative research is often to give "voice" to these disadvantaged groups (Creswell 2007). The group of prospective adoptive parents does not fit this description very well as they are capable of speaking for themselves and are often perceived as being powerful clients in social services. As a group they are also visible, for example in the media. However, in my professional experience their critical voices often seem to widen the gap between themselves and the professionals they interact with.

Another important ethical aspect is that research should always be useful and it should be plausible that the community being studied gains from the study that is conducted (Holma 2005). According to Holma (2005), usefulness can be seen as a contribution to self-understanding, or in offering tools which help to grasp and understand the phenomenon. In considering a 'community' (and especially such a selective community as featured in this research), it may be asked how ethically correct it is to portray a certain picture of a group of people. My aim in this research has not been to describe a group as such, but rather to scrutinize a phenomenon and the tensions that arise within it, through the accounts of personal experiences in that community, and in order to enhance the understanding about their situation and circumstances. Alvesson & Sköldberg (1994, 206-208) further prompt us to ask: "Who gains and who loses through the research questions posed and what is taken for granted in the research question?" The question of what we are striving to achieve through the study is a question of power and values (Flyvbjerg 2001, 162), and the chosen perspective is important to reflect upon. As an adoption and social work professional myself, I have a different position from the user group studied, and one of my aims is to contribute to the wellbeing of adoptive family through an enhancement of the services which are provided to them. Although this aim has good intention, it could lead to the study becoming a research in favour of a particular stakeholder. I have tried to avoid this by adopting critical perspectives and reflection, and also examining the perspectives and interests of all parties involved. As a researcher my aim has also been to open up cultural, societal and political perspectives that perforate the whole setting of inter-country adoption, and in broadening the understanding of the paradoxes and tensions within the service delivery, and the prospective adoptive parents' situation within the institutional context.

In my opinion, the only morally justified way to approach the topic of adoption is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and accordingly stress the rights of the child above all others. But the moral and ethical values from social work also call for acknowledging the other parties who are involved in an adoption. The perspective of the clients, i.e. an adult perspective has consciously been chosen in this study, although this puts the more vulnerable parties of the child and biological parent(s) in shadow. It has to be accepted, though, that only certain aspects and perspectives of a phenomenon can be featured in an empirical study (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994, 209).



In a study such as this, one also needs to reflect on the formulations of the questions and the framework offered in the interviews (Mishler 1986, 97), as well as those which feature in the whole research process (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994). By choosing the concept and viewpoint of clienthood as a categorization, the experiences studied were limited to the institutional setting and this enabled a comparison with other social work contexts. When posing the narrative interview question “Tell me about your adoption process”, the narrative was already directed and the perspective chosen. Had I wanted to investigate the personal process of becoming an adoptive parent the question could have been posed as “Tell me about your process of becoming a (adoptive) parent” or had I had an interest in the motives for deciding to adopt I would have asked “Tell me about the process of deciding to adopt” etc. On a cultural level, the Western viewpoint is obvious in the overall research design. It is clear that this is a study on inter-country adoption as a white, middle-class phenomenon from the viewpoint of our culture. From a sending countries perspective, the question could instead have been directed at the biological parent(s), e.g.: “what made you give your child away” as addressed by Högbäck (2008).

In questioning the political aims of the research, we can also ask what the motives of the study participants were. Most participants in the interviews said they took part in the study as they wanted to contribute to research about the adoption process, A few had negative experiences with professionals that they wanted to share, while some seemed to participate because they had very positive experiences of the process that they wanted to share. Some of those with difficult experiences might have wanted to talk about them in order to make sense of them themselves (Chase 2005). Every set of data has its’ audience, and this applies to both the participant’s stories told in the interviews as well as for the researcher’s story which is presented in the report (e.g. Holstein & Gubrium 2004; Riessman 2008). Additionally, the survey data can be considered to have its’ audience, even if survey research seldom reflects upon this. Since the survey was carried out in close co-operation with the adoption organizations, in addition to the research team, the audience can be seen to include the service providers, and thus the work forms a direct route of feeding back to them. The formulation of the open-answer question was further strengthened in this regard by the wording: ‘feedback on pre-adoption counselling’.



## 4.6 Reflections on validity and reliability

Validity and reliability are important research issues, but the concepts are more commonly used in quantitative research. Nevertheless, the same issues are important to reflect upon in qualitative research. This section will firstly consider some general notions in the research process, before moving on to issues validity and reliability which relate to the two different types of data.

There are main three differences in the target population of the two data samples, which need to be noted. Firstly the survey data includes the experiences of those who have become adoptive parents, while the interview data also includes those service users who have faced a terminated adoption process and have never adopted. Those with a terminated adoption process behind them turned out to be the most difficult group to recruit. However, their inclusion was important because to my knowledge, no previous study has been interested in the experiences of this group of people. Also, from a service provision perspective, those with a terminated adoption process are a crucial user group. Secondly the analysis of experiences in the survey data utilized here covers only the first pre-adoption phase of adoption counselling, that is the assessment and preparation made by the social worker, and not the second phase of mediating services, which is the waiting period. The interview data covers both of these phases. Based on data from the same survey used here, an article in Finnish on satisfaction with the second mediating services phase has since been published (Eriksson 2015). Thirdly, there were some time-related differences in the data samples. The adoptions in the survey data took place in the years 1990–2007, whereas the interviewed adoption processes were somewhat more recent dating predominantly between 2006–2013, as the interviews were conducted in 2009 and 2014.

Another aspect that needs to be addressed, is that of gender. Critical research acknowledges that gender is one of the main organizing categories in social life (Warren 1988, 10). Even if not specifically addressing gender issues, a researcher should be able to take into account this inherent dichotomy in our society (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 1994, 298). In the survey study, the majority of the respondents were adoptive mothers who answered also on behalf of their spouses. I chose to conduct personal interviews with representatives of both genders, in order to give space for both perspectives to be heard. Some of the men expressed the importance of also having a male perspective of adoption

experiences, as a reason for them taking part in the study, and to some extent this confirmed that experiences are gendered in their opinion. According to Hinojosa, Sberna and Marsiglio (2006, 111), adoptive fatherhood has gained little attention in literature and this was also mentioned by some of the male participants.

I chose not to analyse experiences from a gender perspective, even though it could have been a choice in a study of becoming parents. In the findings, some of the women were more prone to expressing emotions of vulnerability, whereas the men had more of principal-based resistance towards public control, but no firmly gendered conclusions can be drawn based on this study. The emotional aspects might also be embodied and not articulated, but instead enacted in the strategic interactions which have been analysed. Superficially however, the differences adhere to research that shows that emotion expression is gendered (Fischer et al. 2004), and that the expression of emotions is already structured in the early socialization of girls and boys (Brody & Hall 1993). In adoption, experiences might be more gender equalized than can be seen in the biological expectancy of a child, where the woman carries the child through the pregnancy. Still, in adoption emotions associated with possible earlier infertility treatments are often embodied as the women's alone, as Malin (2003, 313) claims that most infertility treatments focus on the woman, regardless of the diagnosis. Regardless of this, the psychological experiences of being unable to conceive affects both of the spouses, as do matters of parenthood.

#### 4.6.1 Quantitative survey data

Validity in a survey can be judged based on how reliable the concepts and variables are and whether right measures are used. The measurement of satisfaction in my survey data was made on a one-item rating Likert-scale. This scale has been claimed to have measurement errors due to the unequal distance between the answers (Petty & Caicioppo 1981). In the logistic regression analysis, the Likert-scale was further converted into a dichotomous scale of satisfied vs. dissatisfied, thus lessening the inaccuracy. Combined with the aim of the measurement, I argue that this can be deemed to be accurate enough for the measurement of a single attitude. A further

weakness with the measurement is that the service of pre-adoption counselling (which the satisfaction measured) does not end when the child is placed, but in fact continues for some years as a follow-up of the child in the family. Therefore the services offered in this follow-up period will also affect the overall satisfaction scoring. As the evaluation of the service experience is a result of several service encounters, in the present evaluation of the situation, the effect of some of the encounters having taken place as follow-up visits, should not be major, though.

In regards to surveys, another important issue is the representativeness of the data for the whole population. In this study, the whole target population was included and thus the response rate (55.7%) represents over half of the total target population. Analysis on the non-respondents has been done based on the characteristics of the children, since the child was the study-unit in the main data collection. This included data on age, country of birth, gender and the geographical location of families based on the address information for the postal survey. There was no significant difference between respondents and non-respondents, except that parents of older children were more likely to be non-respondents OR 1.06, 95% CI 1.04-1.08,  $p < .001$  (Raaska 2015, 23). This meant that the response rate was higher among those who had adopted later and the study might have been felt to be more topical to them. Since the survey mainly asked questions about the health and adjustment of the children, it is likely that the answer rate related to these issues more than to satisfaction. The amount of applications submitted to the national adoption board via the three agencies in the same years also corresponds very well to the answer rates in the study, and hence indicates no response bias in terms of the individual service provider.

#### 4.6.2 Qualitative interview data

In the qualitative part of the study, the issues of validity and reliability need to be tackled in a different way. Validity in narrative inquiry has two levels (Riessman 2008, 184): the narrative told by the research participant and the story told by the researcher. When considering the validity of the narrative, some points need to be considered. Narrative inquiry assumes that narratives mirror the world of experiences and thus

gives us access to them, as being true to the narrator (Erkkilä 2008, 201). According to Landman (2012, 33), one possibility for bias is in relation to the truthfulness of the accounts in data is that narratives are always produced for a certain audience in a specific setting (Holstein & Gubrium 2004). Interviews cannot be seen as a mere exchange of information, where a question is asked and a mechanical answer delivered, but rather a joint production of the researcher and the researched, in a specific context told and shaped for a certain audience (Mishler 1986, 96; Holstein & Gubrium 2004; 1997). But applying a constructionist frame to the question about whether a narrative is the truth or not, is not essential (Riessman 2008, 187; Johansson, 313). Narrative theory has its roots in social constructionism and assumes that knowledge is always produced in a specific social, cultural and historical context (e.g. Riessman 2008, 185; Bruner 1987; Valkonen 2007; Johansson 2005). As claimed by Riessman (2002), “personal narratives do not reveal the past ‘as it actually was’”. Instead, “they give us the truth of experiences that can only be understood through interpretation, by paying careful attention to the context that shapes them”.

The meaning of context is manifold and holds in it the contextuality of narrative that also applies to the social context of the telling itself (Erkkilä 2008, 198; Holstein & Gubrium 1997). Consequently, the relation between the researcher and the narrator becomes part of the social context of the narrative. Due to the power imbalance between the researcher and the narrator, several issues need to be considered - for example cultural norms guiding what kind of narratives are accepted and also expected (Alvesson 2011). Additionally, the meanings given to things are culturally based (Bruner 1987). Silverman (2006) goes as far as arguing that when a narrator follows cultural norms, he or she might in the eyes of the researcher be the most authentic. According to Alvesson (2011, 10), what is produced in the interview might sometimes say more about social norms and roleplay as the participants strive for authenticity, than is said about the inner or social world of the person. Alvesson (2011, 103) argues that “moral storytelling” might be seen when the narrator is promoting themselves through presenting a certain positive picture. Researchers such as Langellier & Peterson (2004, 217) and Chase (2005, 657) even propose narrative interviews to be performances where the body is central in storytelling or as a staged performance. This becomes interesting in the narratives of adoption processes, since most of those who have gone through it have told their story about the adoption process to several different audiences. Against this context I had to ask myself how the story told to me as a researcher may have been different or similar to the other times the story was

told, and also “how is it shaped in the light of strategic interaction and power relations within the interview?” (Goffman 1959). Other questions also arose for consideration: What is the culturally accepted emotional story about the adoption process and how does it intertwine into the personal stories? What are the common and culturally accepted stories about institutions exercising public power or those of becoming parents in our society? All of these aspects should be considered as part of the reflexive research process. As Alvesson (2011, 11) argues, the researcher needs to acknowledge the interview as a complex social event that needs theoretical understanding with an awareness of its limitations.

The lived experiences studied are based on retrospectivity, as the narrative is also told in the light of a current evaluation of the situation. These experiences are meaningful constructions including later reflections on the sequences and consequences of events over time (Chase 2005; Bruner 1987). When emotions are seen as being constructed in the immediate interaction and as part of an ongoing relationship (Boiger & Mesquita 2012a), they are further retracted from memory and therefore told in the light of the present state. The outcome of the adoption process and the e.g. the present state of satisfaction with parenthood and life will therefore influence the narrative. This was visible in the mood of the narratives told, and also in the emotional expressions especially of those who had faced a terminated adoption process. People are prone to remembering past events in a way that is consistent with their current attitudes that may have been modified over time (e.g. Ross, McFarland & Fletcher 1981). Studies of autobiographical memory (Levine 1997; Levine et al. 2001) show that the mood of the situation when a story is told influences the recalled emotion, and that accounts are therefore told in light of the narrators’ current evaluation of the situation and the context of the interview situation.

When it comes to the validity of the reporting by the researcher: that translates to the validity of the analysis and interpretation, several levels needs to be considered. In narrative research, it is important to consider the researcher’s pre-understandings, dispositions, as well as historical, social and cultural context (Heyman 1999, 174) throughout the research process: in formulating the problem, in the data-collection, and also all the way through until producing the final report. When accounting for the story told by the researcher, interpretation becomes essential. Both narrators and researchers make their own interpretations, and although it is not possible to eliminate their experiences and expectations, one should be aware of how these influence the

interpretation (Rubin & Rubin 2012; Miller & Glassner 1998). This leads to a possible bias in interpretation (Landman 2012, 33) that I have tried to tackle by way of using the reflexive approach suggested by Alvesson (2011) and Alvesson and Sköldbberg (1994). This has further been strengthened by a phronetic approach using practical wisdom and expertise (Landman 2012, 36). The researcher as an expert has the ability to draw out important elements across the data, applying both a systematic approach and also holistic and intuitive decision-making (Landman 2012, 36-37). Having a good knowledge of the studied phenomenon is a requirement for making qualified interpretations of data (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 1994, 215). No contradiction exists in being well educated about different theories and frameworks, and also trying to be as open as possible in making interpretations of the phenomena one studies (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 1994, 328; Alvesson & Deetz 2000, 130). In the qualitative part of the study I had few theoretical pre-understandings on how I might conceptualize the experiences. My theoretical choices were naturally guided by my previous knowledge of mainly sociological, psychological and social psychological theories within the realm of social sciences. The quantitative data had been collected within a more clinical research framework, and the analysis of satisfaction was based on the data collected. The content analysis of the open answers in the survey data was inductive, but at the same time guided by earlier research and professional knowledge. In the story ultimately reported by me as a researcher, the richness of the data and the depth and accuracy of the analysis has been demonstrated by describing the process of analysis, by using illustrations in the form of excerpts from the data, and by discussing variations that existed within the data.

As emotion, power and strategic interaction are the foci of the analysis in the narrative data, the same issues are present in the relationship between the participants and myself as a researcher. Knowing my interest in enhancing adoption services, participants may have adopted a more critical position. Also, as a social worker I could have inhibited the participants from e.g. openly criticizing the practices or professionals involved. However I found that these potential influences were unfounded. Through my own experience I knew their language usage, the institutional context, and the common experiences which are attached to the process. I was also an 'insider' - trustworthy but still possibly attracting a small degree of reservation due to my role as a social worker (vs. prospective adoptive parent). Some of the narrative was clearly produced for me, as well as questions about practices, facts or rumours which were directed at me and used to engage me in the discussion. Accordingly, the

participants seemed to carefully choose the nuances and content of the story that they chose to tell me. As an audience I have my own personal and professional narrative that shapes the way I listen and interpret - I live in the same welfare state, society and culture that is studied. Adoption has been as natural as any kinship relationship for me in my extended family. In my professional life I have prepared, assessed, controlled and supported prospective adoptive parents, and also developed the services and practices which they receive. However, at the time of writing up this research and for the most of the research process I have not practiced as a social worker. My perspectives on the adoption process are different to those of the participants in the study, but culturally we share the same middle-class background in a Western society, making our cultural and linguistic understanding at least somewhat similar.

As social phenomena change, the replication of a context-dependent study is not likely, and the reliability issue has to be tackled with reflexivity and transparency of the research process (Holstein & Gubrium 2004; Kvale 1995). Kvale (1995) proposes one criteria for evaluating validity in qualitative research as communicativeness, through which the knowledge claims that are made are tested in dialogue. Dialogic validity has been advanced through a horizontal view on knowledge, and has been operationalized as a dialogue with academics, users and adoption professionals. When I compare the narrative data with my professional experience, I would say that it seems to fit with common experiences and individual variation. Preliminary findings of the first interviews with 11 women were reported (Eriksson 2009) and along the research process these and also consecutive findings were taken back to seminars for adoptive parents. The audiences were not the same persons as interviewed, though. This was seen as a way of bringing back the findings to the community which was studied, and to involve them in knowledge production as the feedback was utilized for subsequent data-collection and analysis. Along the way I also met users who did not recognize their experiences in the presented findings, and that further advanced the analysis. Based on this process of analysing the validity and reliability of the study elements, I suggest that the findings (with all the variation in experiences due to the complex social situation) can be seen as typical experiences of the wider population.

## **5 Prospective adoptive parenthood**



In this chapter the main findings from articles I-IV are summarized. Table 4 gathers the findings of the articles according to the four main conceptual frameworks utilized in the sub-studies, and which are further developed in the following chapters. The findings are first presented and discussed on an intrapersonal level: through prospective adoptive parents' perceptions of being on the threshold to parenthood, by moving on to their experiences of the client position within the institutional context, and finally advancing to the interpersonal level and the relationship between the prospective adoptive parent and the professional. Thereafter, a perceived gap in emotional and cognitive accounts of the experiences is introduced and the intertwined experiences of emotion, power, social interaction and satisfaction is summarized. These findings are further interpreted and discussed in chapter 6 within the wider macro-level contexts of social work and inter-country adoption.

Theoretical perspective	Findings
Emotion	<p>Experiences of fear is connected with the potential risk of loss of a wanted child through rejection or termination of the adoption process. (II)</p> <p>Fear and anxiety is linked to a loss of control in the client position. (II)</p> <p>A vulnerable situation and a dependency on the system foster anger and fear. (III)</p> <p>Controlling practices in the dependent relationship with professionals trigger frustration, annoyance and disappointment. (III)</p> <p>Professionals alleviate or worsen stressful emotions of clients in their interactions. (II)</p> <p>Frustration follows slow service delivery, when the aim is not clear. (I)</p>
Power	<p>Controlling practices of the professionals are perceived by the clients as: supporting emotional readiness; entitlement to professional interpretations; time and information control. (III)</p> <p>As clients, prospective adoptive parents experience dependency and limited agency. (III)</p> <p>Strategic interactions by clients are utilized as power negotiations in navigating the context of pre-adoption services. (IV)</p>
Strategic interaction	<p>Clients balance hope and anxiety by regulating their emotional engagement in the process. (II)</p> <p>Fear and anxiety in a vulnerable situation leads to inhibiting negative emotions and engagement in open and trusting relationships with professionals. (II &amp; III)</p> <p>Clients sometimes perceive professionals to have a different primary aim in the pre-adoption setting and hence “play on different teams”. (IV)</p> <p>Prospective adoptive parents use expression games of information, emotion, and team management in order to put their best foot forward. (IV)</p>
Service satisfaction	<p>Most adoptive parents (81.7%) are satisfied with their received pre-adoption counselling services. (I)</p> <p>Satisfaction is best explained on the interpersonal level in the relationship between the client and professional, the interpersonal skills of the social worker, and the overall attitude and climate of the counselling experience. (I)</p> <p>Perception of empathy, supportiveness, communicativeness, trustworthiness, and open-mindedness in social workers are the most important explanations for satisfaction. (I)</p> <p>A perceived deficit in interpersonal skills and a negative attitude of the social worker was hardest to compensate for by way of other service characteristics. (I)</p> <p>A perceived lack in specific adoption knowledge among social workers was identified, especially in non-specialized units. (I)</p> <p>Service satisfaction does not always equate to a sense of preparedness for adoptive parenthood. (I)</p>

**Table 4** Main findings of the sub-studies according to theoretical concept (number of original article in parenthesis).

## 5.1 Accounts of being on the threshold

Fear and anxiety in the institutional setting was found to be associated with a fear of loss of the wanted child, either through rejection or through the termination of the adoption process. The fear of rejection was more associated with a feeling of personal characteristics being behind the reason, while termination was often attributed to processual events in the adoption process. This fear of not becoming a parent by losing a wanted child, is further to be understood in the personal and social situation of the prospective adoptive parents, and is discussed in the following section.

In our society, children are highly valued and desired (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002) and parenthood is often seen as a normative continuum in life. At the same time, having children can be considered as a project (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002), which indicates an illusion of one's ability to plan and control it, and this is also influenced by the fact that rates of infertility are growing in many Western countries (Miettinen & Rotkirch 2008, 7). Some of those whose normative continuum of forming a family is challenged by infertility turn to adoption. Thereby, a taken for granted issue such as having children is questioned and it becomes an existential concern for the persons involved (Westerlund 2002, 145).

The experience of infertility itself has been found to be stressful (Greil, Slauson-Blevins & McQuillan 2010; Ling Lee et al. 2009; Boden 2007; Bevc, Jerman, Ovsenik & Ovsenik 2003) and constitutes an existential crisis (Westerlund 2002; 135-136). Many prospective adoptive parents have faced losses before entering pre-adoption services, and their sense of a loss of control in creating a desired family might resemble that seen in infertility treatments (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell 2003; Westerlund 2002). As von Greil, Slauson-Blevins & McQuillan (2010) point out, the adoption process is started by those who perceive parenthood to be a highly desired social role, and accordingly, a possible loss of a hoped for child is significant. Furthermore, being excluded from parenthood can be considered a social loss because the world of parents is closed to those who are childless (Högbacka 2008; Carey et al. 2009). For those adopting 'by choice', the possible loss of the adoptive child would mean that their desired social role of adoptive parenthood is lost, whereas for those with a background of infertility this would usually mean a total exclusion from parenthood.

Since the data also included narratives of those who had experienced a terminated adoption process, one would expect shame to have been present as a consequence of not qualifying as an adoptive parent. Surprisingly this was not explicitly visible in the narratives, probably because shame is a hidden emotion in our society (Scheff 1990; 2014). By not qualifying in the eyes of the professionals, one would fail to meet cultural social norms (Boiger & Mesquita 2012). All those who had experienced an undesired termination of their adoption process mainly “blamed” the system or professionals for the outcome, and did not accept the positioning of themselves as unsuitable in the eyes of professionals was due to any personal characteristics. Hence their narratives did not contain accounts of shame, but rather sorrow and bitterness. In the process of data collection I had difficulties getting in contact with people who had been rejected for adoption. According to the user organization assisting me in recruiting participants for the interviews, those who are rejected in the adoption process are often difficult to access. I was also unable to reach them through an association for childless persons. The amount of applications rejected by the adoption council is only a few every year (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2006; 2007; 2008; 2009; 2010) but those who quit the process before the permit application is made, are often requested to do so by the professionals. There are also no statistics kept for those who give up during the waiting period. Shielding oneself from shame can in terms of Goffman’s (1959; 1970) strategic interaction be seen as protecting oneself from “loosing face” - that is to preserve one’s sense of dignity or worth, and this may have been carried out by not taking part in the interviews or possibly by choosing not to talk about the issue of shame during the interview.

In addition to the fear and anxiety of the theoretical risk of not becoming parents through the adoption process, time and temporality become crucial matters in an insecure and long process that may stretch over a number of years. Prospective adoptive parents often have the feeling of time running out (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell 2003), as their agency is temporally strongly directed towards the future (Emirbayer & Mische 1998; Emirbayer 1997). Since there is an excess of potential adoptive parents in relation to adoptable children (e.g. Högbäck 2008), there is no need to rush the process from either the children’s or the professional’s point of view. As a result, the perceptions of time between users and professionals can be very different and the perceived urgency of the situation the prospective adoptive parents’ alone. As one narrator expressed it: “the clients are always in a hurry” but “the social workers don’t like it”. This difference in temporality has earlier been addressed by Pasanen (2003, 27). In the survey findings,

some of the dissatisfaction with a protracted service can be explained by different orientations in temporality. Also accounts of perceptions of limited agency can be interpreted in these terms of temporality.

The phase of pre-adoption services can be seen as a liminal phase where these people merely have a desire. A liminal means a transitional stage during which one is entering another state through liminal rites (van Gennep 1960, 3). The desired parenthood is still under the loop of public control in this phase and no guarantees for a child can be given. Sukula (2009, 73–75, 83–88) uses the metaphor of applying and being granted a passport for the future journey of becoming an adoptive parent, with the same emotions of fear and anxiety noted among Finnish single adoptive mothers. Her “passport” symbolizes a permission being granted from the adoption council, and although that permission does not guarantee a child, it is still a ticket to the waiting period. When comparing the insecure situation to having biological children, in a biological pregnancy the transitional markers are known to others, but as Sandelowski et al. (1991) points out that no visible markers exist in an adoption process, and it is a “temporally unmarked transitional stage in the passage to parenthood”. This lack of markers in combination with the uncertainty about the length and outcome of the process was visible in my data as a hesitance in sharing the adoption waiting in order to avoid constant questions from the surroundings. My data also indicates that those who had faced a termination of the adoption process felt that those around them did not know how to relate to the situation and did not understand their sorrow, since the loss was “not a real child” but “merely a wish”. This difference in perception indicates that the process of expecting an adoptive child is alien to many.

As the adoption process is often long, fear and anxiety was seldom a constant presence throughout the process, but more often implicit and hidden and then activated in instances of change, for example unemployment or illness in one’s own situation or unexpected policy changes in the sending country. Some prospective adoptive parents experienced more anxiety in the assessment phase, while others experienced more in the waiting period, depending on their individual situation. The long process further required balancing of their emotional investment in terms of hope. Hope always has a hint of anxiety as Kemper (1987) claims that fear and happiness mixed together creates hope. According to Brodén (2004), women who had lost a biological child through miscarriage or during the first year of the baby’s life had difficulties in daring to believe in a consecutive pregnancy, and were reluctant to keep their hopes up. These

experiences might be very similar for those adoptive parents that have a history of unwanted childlessness, since Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) have identified a similar pattern in swaying between hope and despair in infertility treatments as in the adoption process. In my study, prospective adoptive parents controlled their emotional engagement and investment in the process in different ways in order not to be hit too hard by disappointment, and for the waiting period not to become too burdensome.

At the same time, the institutional requirements of the pre-adoption process call for stability in the client's life-situation in regards to e.g. housing, work and income, and this forces prospective adoptive parents to put their personal life on the back burner in favour of the adoption process, both emotionally and factually. Sukula (2009, 83) has illustrated stability as being one part of staging the play of suitability. Since both socioeconomic and emotional stability needs to be displayed in order to show suitability for adoptive parenthood, these stability expectations can collide with the ever changing and dynamic world of the prospective adoptive parents and the social reality they live in.

In addition to stability, a readiness to take care of a child at very short notice should be maintained throughout a process which stretches over years. The prospective adoptive parent needs to keep up their levels of hope and readiness, but not be too engaged in order for it not to be stressful. These issues create a paradox of "waiting for living" or "living for waiting" as conceptualized by Sandelowski et al. (1991). Long waiting periods in combination with very sudden child proposals also create situations where although one has waited for so long, when the moment comes, one still does not feel ready. For at least two women in the data, the wanted but sudden child proposal was not at all expected, and therefore felt premature. On the other hand, one man said he had given up hope years ago after waiting for so long, and when a child proposal was eventually received it was a shock for him.

## 5.2 Accounts of vulnerability and dependency

In the institutional context of pre-adoption services, the prospective adoptive parents found themselves in a vulnerable client position, subjected to controlling practices of the professionals, and experienced a loss of control in important decision making related to private issues. The space for agency in this institutional setting was perceived as narrow. Since most prospective adoptive parents are middle-class and have not usually been subjected to the controlling power of the welfare state, a difficulty to accept the client position was noted: as one woman said, she was used to “cruising her own life”.

The client position rarely becomes an important part of the prospective adoptive parent’s identity but is activated within the institutional meetings. The position becomes a means of achieving something very important and personal. Most of the prospective adoptive parents do not match the picture of the stereotypical user of social services, of being marginalized or disadvantaged (e.g. Juhila 2006), nevertheless, becoming a client in social services is always connected with an objectification of the person and brings with it a power-asymmetry between the client and the professional (Skau 2007). According to Loseke (1999, 160), according to definition, a client is a person who needs something which suggests being weak.

The asymmetrical power relation is visible to the prospective adoptive parent through the controlling practices of the professionals. These take the shape of both support and control, and can roughly be divided into practices of supporting the client towards emotional readiness, control exercised through the entitlement to professional interpretations, and control of time and information. All these create a dependency, and especially the two latter practices of control contribute to emotions of fear and anger among the prospective adoptive parents. The emotional responses to control and dependency can be seen on two different levels: on one hand, the vulnerable situation and dependency on the system fosters anger and fear. On the other hand, the dependency in the relationship between the client and professional triggers frustration, annoyance and disappointment in the interaction. Dependency on the system means for the prospective adoptive parent’s dependency in one existential but important area of their lives, whilst often remaining fully functional within other areas of their lives.

One indication for the client position and the institutional social work setting itself creating vulnerability and straining emotions is the similarity with experiences of other user groups. Despite the containment of the dependency in the relationship between prospective adoptive parents and the institutional system, it still resembles the experiences of other social work user groups. People who are powerful in other areas of life such as adoptive parents (Simmonds & Haworth 2000) and parents of disabled children, have similar emotional experiences of the client position and vulnerability (Uggerhøj 1995, 25-26) to other clients within social work. They might nevertheless be better equipped for strategic action in the situation through educational and verbal resources, even if their emotional vulnerability is similar.

Kemper's (1990; 1987) model of the way status and power influence the emotions elicited in a social situation fits with my notion of the emotional responses to control and support. According to his model, fear and anger are related to power and status in interaction. When a client perceives his power position as low it creates fear, and a drop in status triggers emotions which among others contains anger. In the data, the feeling of being questioned, misunderstood or mistreated by the social worker served to strengthen the perceptions of fear, but they also triggered anger. By being given status through feelings of being accepted and supported in the process by the professionals, peace of mind was promoted. Professional support and acceptance by professionals in the pre-adoption process increase satisfaction with services, and this is in line with Kemper's (1990) argument that a perceived rise in status will lead to happiness and satisfaction. Though this model claims to be predictive and Kemper (1987; 1990) distances himself from the constructionist approach to emotions, it contributes another layer to the complex field of emotional experiences. Further research also shows that not only the triggered emotion but also the displayed emotion depends on one's perception of status in the situation (Mesquita et al. 2012). This further fits with the ideas of strategic emotional management, which means that the emotion one expresses is related to what is most beneficial in a given situation.

I have also argued that the perception of power asymmetry as control or support by the client influences the interactional response. In line with earlier findings of Dumbrill (2006), the perception of the clients themselves in terms of professional practices being supporting or controlling (or as Dumbrill (2006) expresses it: how they feel power to be used "over" or "with" them), seems to be most important in terms of consequent action. In Dumbrill's (2006) study, those who felt that power was being used "over"



them tended to either resist or play along, while those who felt advocated for were more likely to co-operate.

In pre-adoption services, the preferred persona includes the ‘humble client role’ (Eriksson 2007), as in child protection scenarios the preferred client types are collaborative and submissive (Uggerhøj 2014, 209-210). Mik-Meyer (2006) has shown in a rehabilitation context that professionals see it as undesirable for clients to act as “non-clients” without needs. In pre-adoption services, clients display ‘institutionally preferred personas’ by receiving the service and support which is offered as humble clients, by conforming, and by demonstrating a front of a well-prepared and emotionally ready adoptive parents-to-be.

The conceptualization of clienthood socialization (Alcables and Jones 1985) has been utilized in explaining one further aspect of the clienthood experiences. According to the researchers (*ibid*), one is merely an applicant for something until a working agreement with the “helper” has been established. Thus, an applicant has to be socialized into the client role and be motivated to receive the social work “treatment”. These same elements, i.e. a willingness to co-operate and to accept the definition of the professional and the methods offered, function as a basis for motivation and commitment (Holland 2000). In social work, this kind of helping power is seen as “good intentions” (Järvinen 2013) and getting close to the client and creating a trusting relationship based on honesty is one of the gateways to implement this pastoral power (Järvinen 2013, 285-287; Foucault 1983). But as Uggerhøj (2014, 207) claims, power seems to be mostly hidden in encounters that are experienced as positive by both parties.

When the aim of a service is to create a self-reflecting dialogue with the client, change is always strived for at some level (Juhila 2009, 54). However, this is only possible with those who acknowledge that they need help and legitimize the professional to help them. In pre-adoption services this strived for change is (as previously noted) an emotional readiness for adoptive parenthood through reflection, and a receptivity to information in making an informed decision. Adaptation happens without coercion and some accept the client role and the “help” (here support and preparation) offered, whilst others merely act compliantly in order to glide smoothly through the services. An applicant position (Alcables & Jones 1985) means one either has not been offered a true possibility to receive the support one is entitled to, or that one does not accept the client position which is ascribed. As seen in the survey data, many

of the prospective adoptive parents perceived a lack of preparation and support, but were satisfied regardless of deficiencies in the service provided to them. Hence, a satisfaction with services does not necessarily equal a quality of service, but is merely one dimension of it. Insufficiencies in preparation seemed to partly be compensated with a smooth service provision which satisfied the need of getting a positive assessment, so prospective adoptive parents cared more about a positive outcome than their entitlement to good service. Satisfied applicants can be seen to want the “papers needed”, and their strategy is to pass fast through the system and “surf through” the services. In adoption (as well as in issues in child protection in general), outcome issues are complex and in order to be able to say something about effective practice, we need to consider both subjective client satisfaction and outcome (Trotter 2002).

Even if the prospective adoptive parents are clients in context and are offered services to achieve their desired parenthood, from the viewpoint of the child, the biological parent(s) and the sending country, they are merely offering a possible home. They can therefore be seen to be in a state of double-powerlessness where in addition to being vulnerable as clients, they further have no rights except the right to a good service, since they cannot claim a child for themselves. Prospective adoptive parents cannot be participating in the overall adoption process, as they are not litigants in the child’s case, but merely litigants in the services that are offered to them. But in this regard, they are entitled to good service.

### 5.3 Accounts of agency in navigating pre-adoption services

The dependent client position can either be accepted or made the best of. Even if the power distribution between the social worker and the client is unequal, the client has the ability to act in a way that he chooses and to behave in a way that best serves him in the situation (Goffman 1970; Loseke 1999). Goffman (1983; 1959) argues that always when other people are present, we strive to find a conduct and means of impression management for achieving our individual or social goals. Hence social interaction has calculative aspects which include “expression games” in which the information and emotion conveyed to the other party in an interaction is managed (Goffman 1970, 10). Even if the prospective adoptive parents feel their agency is limited, through their actions they negotiate about power with the professionals, and this constitutes a strategic interaction. When the clients ‘play the game’, they basically conform and adapt to the client role either as a socialization into the client role (Alcabes & Jones 1985) or by displaying compliance as a more deliberate strategic action. In the narratives, strategies of “putting one’s best foot forward” or “showing one’s best side” were identified in the form of information management, expression management, and team management.

One of the controlling practices of professionals is identified as “information control”, and is thus not only theirs, but also one of the clients’ own strategies in navigating the context of pre-adoption services. They do this by adjusting the amount of information they share about themselves in the assessment process, and by regulating their levels of honesty and openness in the interaction. As Goffman (1983) saw information as a prime resource of power in interaction this is an important observation of power negotiations.

According to Hochschild (1998, 9), and Kusenbach and Loseke (2013, 24) people are expected to suppress, change or shape their emotions to fit cultural expectations, and in the context of this study this also applies to fitting institutional expectations. In the institutional context, some emotions are expected to be suppressed in order to display rational behaviour, patience and cooperation. Professionals do tend to acknowledge the stressful situation and in many cases function as regulators of the client’s fear and anxiety. Sorrow following loss is seen as normal within the process, but more conscious emotion expression management is utilized by the clients when it comes to issues of anger, frustration and dissatisfaction. This is done in fear of either ruining

the adoption process, or making it more complicated and therefore expressions such as these are rather contained in interactions with professionals. Negative emotions and possible dissatisfaction is expressed 'backstage' (Goffman 1959), on other stages to alternative audiences e.g. in peer-support groups or in social media, but they are hardly ever expressed in the interactions with professionals.

In child protection, parental cooperation influences the decisions and possible legal interventions that are made (Littell 2001; Platt 2007; Holland 2010), so collaboration has been found to be a well-functioning strategy (Littell 2001). On the other hand, those who are noncompliant and resist child welfare services can face severe consequences (Mirick 2012). Such openly resisting strategies were not found in my study context, but in the strategies of conforming and utilizing expression management, any underlying feelings of resistance are neatly hidden. Cooperation can be confused by the professional with a readiness for change in child protection contexts (Platt 2012). Similarly, in pre-adoption services, co-operation and showing a polished front or having a good amount of theoretical knowledge about adoption does not equal a suitability for adoptive parenthood. To adopt a discourse similar to the one used by the professionals was a further strategy which was used by the prospective adoptive parents. The clients adopted a discourse of adoption (adoption talk) that help them sound more convincing to the ears of the professionals, and this seemed to reinforce the representation that was expected. Noordegraaf et al. (2009; 2010) have shown how prospective adoptive parents present themselves as much as "normal people" as possible, with an emphasis on their positive aspects. The definitions of 'normal' are always connected to time and place, though (Juhila 2009, 55). As the results of strategic interactions seen in the prospective adoptive parents show, they also strive for the same "normativity" that they think is expected from them. This evaluative situation creates a context where one strives to give as favourable a picture of oneself as possible.

The strategies in social interaction seen in this study are very similar to those seen in a study on assessment in mental health, and represented as "playing the game of containing frustration and demonstrating compliance" (Reynolds, Jones, Davies, Freeth & Heyman 2014). Conforming is a functioning strategy (Holland 2000; 2009) that does not disturb or overthrow the "ruling order". The strategies seem plausible from the point of view of the client in a controlling setting. But in Goffman's concept of strategic interaction, the interpretation of the situation and the deliberate choices of action in order to gain benefit for oneself superficially appear to be rational actions.

However, when embodied emotions are integrated into the equation, then also these play an important part in the interpretation of the situation and the subsequent choice of action.

Goffman (1959, 118) claims that when choosing behaviour in interaction, one considers “is it worth (my) while or not to undertake the cost and risk of bypassing, subverting or challenging the enforcement system” or should one “just adapt”? The question therefore becomes where the line can be drawn between an acceptable “putting one’s best foot forward” through partial information control and emotional management, and alternative actions that may be seen as problematic from the point of view of service delivery. Is the client allowed to act in his or her own interest in an adoption process, and what is the moral justification for such actions? Is it the experience of senseless bureaucracy, social workers being experienced as obstacles, or the torment of long waiting times which prompts these problematic actions, or is it natural to be driven by one’s strong desire for a child as long as it does not hurt anyone and given that “everybody else does it”? When is the line crossed when the polished performance becomes too polished, or is it just ‘part of the game’, and something which does little harm against the backdrop of attaining the desired goal?

Accounts of conscious strategic behaviour that maximized personal gain were more common among those former clients that had not trusted the professionals, had not been socialized into clienthood, and who had conformed. But strategic actions also take place in trustful relations, and naturally occur as a part of all social interactions. However, a ‘cynical actor’ (Goffman 1959) who tricks the audience of professionals is created when trust is not present in the relationship, and this may be either because of a lack of trust in the specific worker who for some reason does not deserve trust (by their behaviour or words), or because confidence in the system does not exist (Smith 2001).

In the adoption process, the professionals in the pre-adoption services are not the only audience. But as Noordegraaf et al. (2009) has shown, the professionals themselves become part of the strategic actions of showing a polished front in a the global inter-country adoption ‘play’, for example when they write home-study reports by reformulating the prospective adoptive parents’ cases in a positive light. The strategic actions conducted by the clients in the beginning stages of the process, slowly become a joint play with the professionals in constructing narratives of suitable parents to meet the sending country’s requirements and to maximize the chances of them being chosen for a child match, after the professionals have completed their pre-adoption evaluation.

Furthermore, the feeling that time is running out is one motivator behind the agency of the prospective adoptive parents and their strategic actions. This is also one of the reasons for the phenomenon of “bargaining” for countries (Högbacka 2008) which takes place to strategically maximize the chances of having a child that meets the desired preferences as fast as possible. This happens through choosing and changing the country of preference according to the expected waiting times, and also the amount of children available. But to some extent, this choosing of country is also a part of the institutionalized process itself, and hence is expected to a certain degree since prospective parents are asked to choose a country and account for their preferences concerning the child’s health and age when applying.

In many ways the pre-adoption setting appears to be experienced as a performance where one gains when playing along, and therefore compliant strategies as well as “putting one’s best foot forward” are seen as common, and accepted to a certain degree. A few narrators in the data reflected upon their strategic actions and found ‘tricking’ the professionals to cause moral dilemmas for themselves. Others asserted that they had never pretended to be anything but themselves and had been totally honest in their interactions with professionals, but obviously acknowledging the option of it having been possible to behave in another way.

## 5.4 Relationships in midst of support and control

The survey data showed that 82% of the adoptive parents were fairly or very satisfied with the pre-adoption assessment and preparation they had received. The same was been found true for the pre-adoption mediating service (83% satisfied) based on the same FinAdo-study (Eriksson 2015). The analysis of the open answers in the survey revealed that the basis for good service experiences and satisfaction lies in the interaction and relation between the client and the social worker, more than in the characteristics of the prospective adoptive parent, child, or the process itself. Features of the service experience which had the strongest associations with satisfaction were those where social workers were perceived to be emphatic, trustworthy and communicative. Furthermore, a positive experience was predicted by the perception of an open and unquestioning attitude of the social worker, and a supportive climate. Those adopting a subsequent child were pleased with a familiar social worker that they knew and could trust. A negative attitude by the social worker or a perceived deficit in interpersonal skills were hardest to compensate for. These findings from the survey were also strengthened in the narrative data and indicates the importance of the relationship between the client and the professionals.

In the interview data, positive emotions were associated to parenthood (joy, happiness, and fulfilment), expectancy (anticipation and hope), and also with the actions of individual professionals. These positive emotions were often cognitive emotions such as gratefulness and relief following a stressful emotion or feared scenarios. The emotions were also personified and responses often linked to the actions of individual professionals. Many of the narrators wanted to point out their positive experiences within the pre-adoption services when they were grateful for the service and support they had received. As one expressed it, the experiences of adoption counselling were better than expected:

*“The social worker that we had in the pre-adoption counselling, she gave us a really positive experience, when we kind of had expected that this counselling wasn’t going to be very pleasant. And then it was...”*

My findings are in line with parental experiences of child welfare and protection studied in Finland (e.g. Hietamäki 2015). In this and other studies, a good working-relationship with the professional seems to be crucial for positive experiences of

the services (Hietamäki 2015; Holland 2000; 2011, Mason 2012). Prospective adoptive parents call for similar qualities (trust, empathy and understanding) in the professionals and the nature of the relationship (collaboration, acceptance, respect) as clients within child welfare services (e.g. De Boer & Coady 2007; Maiter, Palmer & Manji 2006; Platt 2008). Furthermore, the same qualities of physicians in infertility treatment settings accounted for satisfaction among patients, and respect, empathy and personal care were seen as being most important in creating positive service experiences (Malin et al. 2001).

In social work, from a psychosocial approach, a positive relationship between the client and professional is essential for the outcome of the service. De Boer and Coady (2007) even claim that a good relationship is necessary for the provision of adequate child welfare services. Cree and Davies (2007) have found that social workers and users of social services see the basis for a good relationship to be trust between parties. Trust has also been found to be one key to achieving successful pre-adoption counselling (Eriksson 2007). Trust is built between two parties in a relationship. According to Sztompka (1999, 24, 69) trust is a strategy to tackle an unpredictable future through agency, but it always contains a risk of losing (Luhmann 1988, 97). According to Smith (2001, 228), “service users will not take the risk of giving a truthful account if they expect to be disappointed.” One father in my interviews said that he gave the social workers as much trust as they deserved, and referred to utilizing information control when needed in his interactions with them. In addition to being present in the immediate social interaction, emotions are grounded and shaped in the relationship, and negative emotions create a climate within the relationship which causes it to languish (Boiger & Mesquita 2012a).

Holland (2000) argues that the process and outcome of assessments based mainly on verbal interaction are closely connected to the interpersonal relationship between the client and professional. According to her, clients in child welfare assessments who are co-operative, motivated, and articulate in the relationship are ascribed the same general attributes, thus having an impact on the result of the assessment. On the other hand, this makes strategic action worthwhile from the point of view of the client. In the survey data, a communicative social worker tended to lead to greater satisfaction, which supports Trotter’s (2002) claims that good workers in child protection openly and honestly address aims, processes, roles and expectations within the setting. In the pre-adoption services, the professional’s communicability varied from communicating



the aims and expectations of the service, to communicating the on-going state of the evaluation of suitability, to the sharing of information during the process. When not doing so, it was perceived as a controlling practice.

In the qualitative data, many narrators depicted good relationships with professionals that were trustful, supporting and positive, and functioned as a good basis for both reflective discussions and self-evaluation. Social work expects a change to occur in clients through a self-realization achieved through self-reflection. Relationships with trust and mutual understanding are challenged when in the institutional space of pre-adoption services, a client is expected to be open, trusting and open to information, even though his or her suitability is being evaluated. Literature on reflection (Fook & Gardner 2010, 188-189) claims that becoming aware of and challenging one's own values and assumptions is difficult and even hard due to tendencies of dealing with matters purely intellectually, or through feelings of vulnerability that arise when doing so. Therefore a "safe environment is required for success" (Fook & Gardner 2010, 189). The emotional state also affects the handling of information and a person who feels threatened might not be responsive to information in terms of preparation. This is especially true for those that feel questioned during the assessment and pre-adoption process, but might still proceed to adopt and then find they lack the needed preparation to face adoptive parenthood.

From the client's point of view, a controlling setting challenges their possibility to be honest and to engage in honest reflection. When the client perceives the support turning into control without an insight into the problem (as defined by the professional), then strategic actions are utilized, hence lessening the trust and having the potential of turning into conflict. However, the whole process of a suitability assessment and proving emotional readiness is based on the evaluation of the professionals as they hold the right to make the decision, so there is a clear imbalance that needs to be addressed through the development of a trustful relationship.

Partnership is often fostered in social work literature (e.g. Palmer, Maiter & Manji 2006), and requires a mutual goal to be established. Ryburn (1997) challenges the whole possibility of forming partnerships in a relationship that is professionally led and controlled. According to him, "partnership cannot originate in systems that are fundamentally unjust" regardless of any good intentions. Even if true partnership is not achieved, the perception of having a common goal or aim with the professional enhances the situation and the relationship. Since satisfaction scores were high in the quantitative data, the professionals seem to be fairly good at balancing the issues of support and control, as well as balancing differing aims.

## 5.5 Emotion and reason

Emotions have been one of the important and perforating concepts throughout the study. In the narrative data, the emotional accounts were often followed by cognitive statements. This is not surprising though, since divisions between reason and emotion are deeply rooted in Western society (Williams & Bendelow 1998), and in standard narratives, reason is often contrasted with emotions (D'Andrade 1995). In the narratives, cognitive and emotional reasoning are often expressed as two sides of the same coin. For example the control exercised in pre-adoption services is accepted cognitively, "as one cannot grant children to anyone", yet jealousy and the unfairness of being "examined" in a way that biological parents are not, are visible. Conceptually, control is seen as both good and necessary, but this is not always the case when one is directly subject to it. One woman interviewed expressed that it would be desirable if the social workers were to more or less immediately spot those who are "decent people", and those who are not in the assessment. Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell (2003) have found the same phenomenon of anger and frustration over the control that society exercises on family creation, as I noted within the study data. In my data there was a widespread cognitive understanding of the necessity for the public control of adoption (which supports von Greiff's (2004) findings), but a great vulnerability is also expressed through stressful emotions which are seen in the data. As one adoptive father said:

*"I think it is quite justified that eligibility is checked at least at some level, regardless how well this is ultimately possible to do. But since the children are usually traumatized to some degree, then I think it is quite ok ...//... I don't whine about there being a process where eligibility is stated and that there is a council that evaluates it..."*

On an emotional level, vulnerability is well visible in situations seen as intrusions into the private, exemplified for example in the home-visits made during pre-adoption counselling. This inspection and evaluation of private and personal domains also gave rise to anger that "no other families, having biological children, are being asked about these things". Envy or jealousy were triggered in prospective adoptive parents when comparing their situation to those who become parents through biological pregnancy and never need to expose their private family life to outsiders. Jealousy was expressed

in relation to other people who become pregnant and who did not have to go through any assessment. Emotions such as these also arose in relation to those who gained children faster through the adoption process.

*“It happened about a year before our adoption, and it was very difficult to handle because they started their process about five years later than us, and they got one (a child) much earlier. And we did not even know if we were going to have one. That felt unfair...”*

My study shows that reason and emotions do not always correspond, which is one cause for deliberate strategic interaction. The voice of reason might say that professionals should be trusted because they act with good intentions, but emotions such as fear and anxiety might still hinder a trustful relationship developing and promote strategic actions. The legal bureaucratic process is supposed to be rational and the service is conducted accordingly, but one's agency is also influenced by one's emotions. This gap between emotional and cognitive accounts corresponds well with the two different primary aims of the client and the professional which are scrutinized in Article IV. The client primarily wants a child and the professional is assessing their suitability for possible parenthood. These two aims can be conceptualized as an illusionary gap between emotion and reason, and are further discussed in chapter 6.1 in relation to broader discourses within inter-country adoption.

## 5.6 The clienthood experience compiled

To understand the multiple and layered experiences of the clienthood of prospective adoptive parents, and taking into account all of the perspectives presented; it is important to note that there are often at least three simultaneous emotional processes going on in the pre-adoption services: a sorrow process following infertility that is usually present when entering pre-adoption services (e.g. Ojuva 2010; Malin 2006), the ambivalent personal process of growing into (adoptive) parenthood, and a clienthood socialization process when one is placed in the client position with all its tensions. In adoption research, literature, and earlier professional accounts (e.g. Gutter 1998; Tollemacher 2008) on prospective adoptive parenthood, the situation of (prospective) adoptive parents has often been interpreted from a psychoanalytic or psychodynamic perspective, hence stressing themes such as loss and worthlessness through infertility (Crawshaw 2011) as well as the process of growing into (adoptive) parenthood. Though these perspectives are important parts of the picture, they often neglect the clienthood process and the institutional context which are further embedded in bureaucratic and legal processes.

The complex interplay of power, emotion and social interaction in clienthood is embedded in a wider social situation where the background and psychobiography of the person are projected into their clienthood, as the experiences of past events become part of the context through embodied emotions and cognitive evaluations of the situation. Additionally, the institutional setting where the power of the welfare state is very much present in the public control exercised by the professionals, also projects societal values and norms into the context of clienthood. Although the client has agency to act within this interaction (and does so), which means that the strategic interaction within the relationship has to be understood and interpreted from both the client position, as well as through the layers of the social situation, and taking into account both emotional aspects and cognitive reasoning. Both the client and the professional act strategically in the interaction, interpreting the moves and intentions of the other party, often (according to Goffman 1970) even before the other one has made a move. The positions in the setting are constantly being negotiated and this interaction between client and professional forms a relationship. Thus, the forces of emotion, cognition<sup>2</sup>, power and interaction are formed and influenced by each other through constant evaluations of the situation and responses to it.

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2 Social cognition forms a whole theoretical discussion of its own (e.g. Fiske & Taylor 2013), and is not scrutinized here in further detail.



## **6 Inter-country adoption and child protection**

In this chapter, the clienthood experiences which have been studied on a micro-level, are further interpreted through macro-level phenomena of social work, especially child protection and inter-country adoption. The discussion on the paradoxes which arise on these levels completes the picture of the clienthood experience, as they are visible and present in social interactions on an interpersonal level. In the following chapter, as a means to connect the findings on micro- and macro-level discussions within the synthesis, the illusory gap between emotion and reason visible in the narrative accounts, is further developed. This is then connected to a discussion on rights and justifications, and additionally, the forced normativity and risk-discourse present in adoption practices is challenged by a co-creation and capacities-discourse in social work practice, based primarily on the needs of children. The discussion is developed on three levels: inter-country adoption as a global phenomenon, the adoption process as a whole, and the pre-adoption process for prospective adoptive parents that is encompassed.

## **6.1 Wanting a child or providing a home**

What makes the perception of two different aims interesting in this study is that there was a clear connection between the emotional statements with the personal motivation for the adoption process (i.e. “wanting a child”), whereas the cognitive accounts adhered to the official aim of the service of “providing a home” through safeguarding suitability and preparedness. As the personal and emotional accounts of “wanting a child” are mainly expressed by and oriented towards the client, it can be seen as an adult-driven Western reproduction discourse. The accounts of reason can then be seen as a professional aim, and as an institutional discourse of child protection of “providing a home”. These different discourses can further highlight discussions on the aims for the overall practice, i.e. what and whose “problem” adoption strives to solve - the social problem of the child or the adult’s desire for a child. Table 5 illustrates an interpretation of the knowledge orders (Foucault 1993) that are identified in the two discourses.

<b>“WANTING A CHILD”</b>	<b>“PROVIDING A HOME”</b>
Personal	Institutional
Expressed through emotion	Reason, through cognitive statements
Client’s (prospective adoptive parents) main aim	Professional’s main aim
Reproduction discourse	Child protection discourse

**Table 5** Different orders of knowledge in the pre-adoption services and Western inter-country adoption discussion

The main tension that follows from these two knowledge orders is the paradox of solving two “problems” in one intervention (adoption), and meeting the needs of two very different and unequal parties: the child and the adult prospective adoptive parents. Through the placement the child gets the family s/he needs and the prospective adopters gain the child they want. On the surface this seems to be a good and easy solution, but it does not go without tensions.

Adoption (as proposed by Henderson 2000) strives for a “win-win-win” situation where the “problems” are solved and of all the three parties involved in the adoption triad gain: the child gets a home, the biological parent(s) are freed from responsibility, and the adoptive parents get a desired child. This can further be extended to the global level by being seen as a solution not only for individuals, but also for the sending countries (Martinelli Barfoed 2008, 23). In the media, adoption is often seen as a straightforward and unproblematic solution for all parties, and mirrors a moral order where orphaned, needy children are not left abandoned, but are taken care of by loving and caring Western parents (Martinelli Barfoed 2008, 122-123). But this moral order is disrupted and disturbed by critical standpoints about adoption. The rhetoric which Hübinette (2005) uses in his post-colonially oriented study about adoption from Korea as “orphan exporting countries” and an “adoption industry”, as well as adoptees being referred to as “grateful and privileged children of elite families” or “idealised and perfectly assimilated adoptees in academic research” challenge the Western discourses of “adoption as solution”.

Seeing adoption as a solution becomes problematic when adoption should be acknowledged as a social issue, and the problem it addresses is further seen to be in “another country” (Martinelli Barfoed 2008, 120-121). In inter-country adoption, a Western need is hence solving a social problem in another part of the world. When putting this in a post-colonial context, the direction of the adoptions almost always



goes from the poor South and East to the industrialized West (Dickens 2009) and it is easy to shut one's eyes to the problems. In this light, the "root causes" of inter-country adoption easily become overlooked, whilst they should be addressed at micro- and macro-level, and both locally and globally (Fronek et al. 2015).

## **6.2 Rights and justifications**

From this lack of grasping the global adoption scene as a single phenomenon, the perception of different aims easily leads to a common misconception of the opposing rights which feature in the context, and these are addressed and discussed further here. Middle-class Westerners are guided by a strong equality and rights discourse which is also an important part of social work (Ife 2001). Furthermore, a dichotomy between the right of the child and the right of the adult is a common trend in our society (Vandenbroeck, Roose & De Bie 2011, 80). An emotional argument from a personal adult perspective contributes to a perception of the child's rights conflicting with the needs and wishes of the prospective adoptive parent. This perception of conflicting interests has been seen by Quartly (2012) as leading to a gap emerging between the professionals and clients on a more general level.

This tension as a discussion of rights in the adoption practice and the adoption field also takes the form of a societal discussion about the right to adopt for e.g. same-sex couples or disabled persons, in which human rights are often used as one base of argument (Martinelli Barfoed 2008, 99-100). These discussions are important but often miss the point or use inconsistent argumentation in the context, since no one has a right to adopt, to demand the adoption of a child, or to claim someone else's child through adoption (Lammerant & Hofstetter 2007). In human rights, the child's right to protection has been given highest value (Ife 2001). According to Bartholet (2015; 2007), the child's human rights have to be brought more into focus in adoptions and the human rights discussion should therefore originate in the human rights of the child (Gibbons & Rotabi 2012). According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child's need is also the only legitimate reason for adoption. Based on this argumentation, the only right possible to grant adults is the right to a good service and

an assessment based on equal premises, and this right is safeguarded in law. In the pre-adoption services, it is this same rights and equality discussion that emotionally gives rise to jealousy and envy when one feels that others are “jumping the queue” or are matched with a child prior to oneself as addressed earlier.

With rights always comes responsibilities and justifications. The justification of inter-country adoption can again be seen on two levels: that of an individual child’s adoption or as a global child protection practice. For example Fronek et al. (2015) and Roby et al. (2013) advocate for the importance of a social justice perspective on inter-country adoption. A few narrators in my data touched upon the ethical issues involved in these practices and talked about the shame of possibly having done something which was ethically questionable. These emotions are triggered through questions such as: Is it right to bring a child here from the other side of the world? and How can we morally defend our choices? The adoptive parents need to justify themselves mainly on an individual level whereas inter-country adoption as a social work practice needs to be scrutinized in terms of justification on both micro- and macro-levels. When we ask who has the right to become a parent, we also need to ask who is forced to give their child away, which opens up the question of societal structural inequality. When we discuss adoption from a Western individual perspective, we often miss the perspectives conveyed for example by studies on biological mothers (e.g. Högbäck 2012, 2014; Roby & Brown 2015), and that every adoption is preceded by separation and loss.

By the justification of adoption as a child protection intervention, we arrive at outcome issues and the question about how to measure good outcomes. Adoption has been proven to be an effective way to improve children’s well-being as a child protection intervention (SOU 2003; Bohman & Sigvarsson 1990; van IJzendoorn, Bakermans-Kranenburg & Juffer 2007; Dalen 2013). The justification of individual cases has to be seen in relation to these outcomes in adoption, though this is a very difficult outcome to measure. In Western academic research the quality of the outcome has been measured in terms of the child’s adjustment into the family and society. But has an adoption failed if the child is for example taken into custody from the adoptive family? Is a break-down of the adoption family to be seen as a bad outcome? If we apply the thought of the circumstances of the child always improving in a Western country we would say that the adoption has not failed, but if we adopt this line of thinking, then we need to make sure that only those children who have no foreseeably decent future in their birth country are adopted.

A “clean break” is also made in terms of the birth nation when the adoptee is being incorporated into both the receiving family and the receiving society (Yngvesson 2002). This fits with the notion of Hübinette (2005, 19) that inter-country adoptees are seldom treated as a diaspora. He criticizes the whole institution of inter-country adoption and the assimilation of these children into our societies. As some outcome studies indicate a higher incidence of mental problems and suicidal risk exists for adoptees (e.g. Hjern, Vinnerljung & Lindblad 2004; Hjern, Lindblad & Vinnerljung 2002), and studies also address the racism experienced by adoptees (e.g. in Sweden: Tigervall & Hübinette 2010; in Finland: Koskinen 2015), we will never know whether the intervention was successful until years later. So, whose task is it to define a successful adoption: the adult adoptee, social and medical professionals, the adoptive parents, or researchers? There can be no universal answer to when an adoption is ‘right’ but every child’s situation should be considered independently. As social work is about change for the better and this can usually be demonstrated for mainstream adoptions (even if an element of uncertainty will always be present), it cannot be denied that social work has an important role to play in both answering these questions, and in developing practices and policies.

As long as we see adoption from the viewpoint of the individual child, it can be justified case by case. But when we scrutinize adoption as a social problem, it is harder to find justifications for the practices. One can also argue that in a globalizing world the responsibility for children becomes more joint, but this would require a shift from an adult-driven market of adoption to a more child-centred one. Furthermore, in order to be a global practice it would require a scrutiny of the whole inter-country adoption practice, with a sensitivity to the cultural and power issues which exist between the countries involved, and also considerations of the vulnerability of the birth families (e.g. Lyons 2006).

As Fronek et al. (2015) also argue, intercountry adoption tends to be scrutinized and grasped in parts, which hides the discussion of a broader perspective. They argue that from an individualistic perspective, the solution-focused discourse highlights the needs of the adult clients in the adoption setting, and the welfare solution for individual children. According to them (*ibid.*), the global practices of inter-country adoption have hardly changed in sixty years due to a focus on this individual level.

### **6.3 From risk and normativity assessment to co-creation of needs**

In the pre-adoption process, the professional's aim is based on the advocacy of the child which can be in conflict with the prospective adoptive parents desire to have a child. For prospective adoptive parents, this indicates a separation of the pre-adoption services from the adoption process as a whole. When the aim of the pre-adoption services for each party is separately defined, it can be concluded that there are in fact no opposing rights between the parties, as the adult client's right in this phase is to receive a good service, and this can be promoted in the practices which also safeguard the rights of others involved.

The adoption professionals are accountable for the outcomes of adoption, and thus balance the risk of the future parents. They have a responsibility if all of the potential risk-factors are not spotted and something happens (Parton 1999, 124). That implies a minimization of risk in the future adoptive families, which is undertaken by way of the assessment procedure. According to Parton (1999, 120), an assessment of actual and potential high risk becomes the central concern, and activity which took place in the late 1980s in child protection and family care are reflected through this risk assessment (Vandenbroek et al. 2011, 76). The concept of risk in adoptive parenthood has hardly been studied, with the exception of the study on strengths and risks by Stroobants, Vanderfaellie and Put (2011). In addition to risk-assessment, the adoption professional's actions show their selection is based on societal and normative values of suitable parenthood according to changing family ideals (Berebetsky 2006; Shanley 2001, 149) in the same way as medical doctors in infertility treatments (Malin 2003). For example a career-oriented woman was according to Malin (2003, 314) in the eyes of the doctors seen as selfish and as an opposition to a capacity of "maternal love". This fits with the accounts of one woman in my data illustrated in Article III, who felt her suitability to be questioned because of her career. No single normative family exists, but the ideal is both time and cultural dependent. This becomes especially visible in inter-country adoption when the criteria expressed for adoptive parents by the sending countries differ greatly. Nevertheless, when the social worker makes decisions about suitability for (adoptive) parenthood, selective moral judgments also function in the process.

If viewed merely on an interpersonal level, the practices of the professionals (analysed in Article II) can be seen as unduly controlling. But these need to be seen separately

from bad practice and interpreted in a wider context of the welfare state. Once this is done, it becomes clear that in child welfare social work, control and responsibilities on different levels are needed in order to achieve a just and fair society. However, according to Vandenbroek, Roose and De Bie (2011), expert-centred practices are yielding in child protection as control is turning into emancipatory practices and support. In the contemporary discourse in child welfare, control should be avoided as far as possible in favour of support (Vandenbroek, Roose & De Bie 2011), though as Ryburn (1997) pointed out, this does not lead to true partnership regardless of the discourse involved. A hesitancy among professionals to empower and involve prospective parents can be seen in the already adult-driven area of inter-country adoption. Thus, as the professionals act in the interest of the (invisible) child, they can be seen as acting in an expert-centred way.

The focus on power tends to focus on overt and authoritarian use, and other dimensions of power can be easily neglected (Healy 2000, 82). According to Healy (2000, 75), critical perspectives on the power ratio between client and professional in child protection research has contributed little to enhance statutory child protection practice. Furthermore, researchers' voices which are too critical are often silenced in justification that they are not constructive (Alvesson & Deetz 2000, 202). This study suggests alternative approaches to risk-assessment in terms of capacity-assessment, as well as in establishing a joint aims definition to be used in the pre-adoption services (and as separate from the rest of the adoption process). The power asymmetry cannot be dissolved in the tasks of either child protection (Healy 2000, 76) or adoption, but as Foucault pointed out, power is also productive and therefore presents a valid tool in social work. My analysis has also shown control to take the shape of supporting practices within pre-adoption services (Article III), and that clients are very satisfied with this service element. Also, based on the survey data most clients were pleased with the professional practices they received (Article I), which is a good basis for further improving practice.

In protecting children from harm, society needs control. Control in social work is hence not to be seen merely as a negative feature, and it can be used productively through its capacity for change (Appel Nissen, Pringle & Uggerhøj 2007, 133; Healy 2000). From a social work perspective control is to be seen as a means to achieving productive change to better the outcome of the created adoptive family, where capable and well-prepared parents are joined with children. On the other hand, focus on the

power that exists in the relationship between the client and professional, makes it explicit and avoid violations and abuses of power. Usually control is felt more strongly by the client and the professional might not even be aware of exercising power in an uncomfortable way. In pre-adoption assessment and preparation, control and support are intertwined and it is therefore up to the professionals to balance them, as Appel Nissen, Pringle and Uggerhøj (2007, 135) argue professionals need to take responsibility for using power in a productive way.

When conceptually separating the pre-adoption services from the whole adoption process, we need to redefine the needs of the clients in new terms through co-creation, since the professional aim of pre-adoption services cannot be simply to provide children, but requires another joint aim to be articulated. Through a case by case definition we can achieve more for prospective adoptive parents and prepare them in an individual way. For some the need might be processing infertility, others it may involve acquiring knowledge about adopted children, or getting to know other adoptive families in building a support network. For some clients, all of these needs may be present. A 'one-model-fits-all' approach is often used in pre-adoption services, but it does not work for everybody and creates frustration when one does not 'fit' into the services which are on offer. The same has been found in child protection assessments (Harris 2012). In child protection the most effective workers are those who primarily work from and with the client's own definitions, instead of the professional's (Trotter 2002). In the context of adoption, that means also being able to see beyond the prospective adopters' primary need and aim of having a child.

In promoting more child-centred inter-country adoption practices, we would need to turn our attention to the needs of the children and possibly challenge the normative family creation practices in favour of a true match with parental capacities, instead of a moral evaluation and enforced normativity. The normative family creation enforced in pre-adoption services is perceived as constraining to some prospective adoptive parents, and generalizing needs of children to guide the risk assessment process is seen as too sweeping. These are issues that contribute to the sense of pre-adoption services being a "performance" or "play", and where strategic interaction is to some extent accepted.

The normative "nuclear" family ideal with the creation of families resembling their biological counterparts (Shanley 2001, 12; Berebetsky 2006, 36) stems from a time when baby and infant adoptions were the norm, and hence generalizing the needs of these children as a norm was plausible. Furthermore, it was assumed that an adopted

baby did not carry any history, that is, it was not treated as an individual (Shanley 2001, 12). This ideal came under challenge not only due to adoption being carried out across ethnic groups, but also because older children were adopted and openness in adoption became the norm. Instead true needs of individual children, and the types of parents that are needed should meet.

In inter-country adoption, the construction of a children's needs prior to adoption differ depending on both viewpoint and cultural perspectives. The Western view which is represented in the receiving countries tends to stress the emotional needs of the children based on psychodynamic theory, whereas in many sending countries the children are seen as extensions of the adults and therefore e.g. their material or spiritual needs may be valued higher. The children are ultimately placed according to the sending countries understanding, and in cases where it collides with our Western definitions, it can be difficult to understand from a welfare state perspective. For example, economic well-being or Christianity as a measure and criteria for "good" parenthood can seem to be unreasonable. The children may also not be placed according to their needs, but rather as a means to further political aims, and this can be seen in the case of Romania which ended inter-country adoptions as a political decision at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century prior to the country joining the EU (Dickens 2009; Chou & Browne 2008). Understandings of moral and good parenthood might also lead to political decisions that have little to do with children's needs, as for example the recent case of Russia deciding to ban adoptions to countries that accept same-sex marriages. This specific issue led to the co-operation between Finland and Russia in terms of inter-country adoption being closed down in 2015. Such cases illustrate that suitability is not only defined based on the needs of children, but also on moral stances and political forces.

Meeting the needs of a specific child is challenging in inter-country adoptions, and this can easily become a lottery since the needs of the children are rarely assessed thoroughly in the sending countries, and are not always truthfully or accurately mediated to the receiving country and adoptive family. The vague definition of a generalized 'best' for the child also causes frustration in relation to who can define the best interests of an unknown child. This is seen in cases where the prospective adoptive parents feel that they are acting in the best interests of the child, but also feel that the right to that argument is held and accepted only for the professionals as advocates of the child. This tends to cause frustration among prospective adoptive parents as their attempts to contribute to the best interests of the child seems to be rejected.



I have claimed that the relationship between the client and the professional and issues of trust are important factors in pre-adoption services. Within this claim is a need to establish a joint needs and aim definition in co-operation between the client and the professional, specifically related to the pre-adoption services. This could further be enhanced by changing the professional risk-discourse more towards a capacities evaluation based on children's true needs.

## **6.4 Looking back at the research process**

When looking back on the research process as a whole, I want to make some reflections on the challenges that have arisen in the process, before advancing to the final conclusions and implications. One main challenge in a reflective, critical and abductive reasoning has been to account for the reflection itself on different levels (Alvesson & Sköldbberg 1994, 35), but without dwelling endlessly on the choices and interpretations made along the research process. In the process, much of the prior professional experience I had has been supported, but it has also been re-conceptualized and theorized. Adoption professionals and (prospective) adoptive parents will recognize many of the findings of this process, which further validates them. Specifically however, this contribution is important since the survey revealed there is a perceived lack in knowledge about adoption issues among social workers in general, and researching the issue has revealed a potentiality for consideration and change.

As the research has been conducted over several years through abductive reasoning – given that the research topic arose from professional experience and the process has strived to combine professional, academic and user knowledge, I have found myself sometimes wondering what the initial foundations and starting points were, and what the final conclusions are. The knowledge presented in this study has grown in interpretative circles and the reasoning has not always been straightforward. When it comes to the narrative data, the reflexive process has included the balancing of emotion, power and interaction theoretically on all levels: as lived experiences by the narrators in the institutional setting, and as information which was shaped and made meaningful in the interview-setting.



The starting perspective of the study was broad as I utilized a methodological framework with a possibility for both quantitative and qualitative methods, and also maintained a theoretical openness to social science theories within different disciplines. One main angle was to scrutinize inter-country adoption practices as a social work practice, because often in Finnish discussions it is seen as separate from child protection, and hence lacking in social work literature. Furthermore, my epistemological choices advanced the user perspectives because the clienthood position in this specific context is not common. Other perspectives would have highlighted different aspects, and for example my focusing mainly on negative emotions has received both praise and critic along the way, but the praise has mostly come from the users themselves.

My researcher position has been one of the issues constantly reflected upon during the research process. It is a struggle to study a topic which is familiar to yourself, and to maintain a constant dialogue and reflection within oneself that is not confirming and taking the familiar for granted, but one which seeks alternative explanations and upholds a sensitivity to the user perspective. During the process I had experiences of being an 'insider' and an 'outsider' in different contexts. I started out as an insider in the adoption field as a practicing social worker in adoption work. Collecting the interview data felt familiar through my professional experience of doing in-depth interviews as a social worker and having listened to numerous adoption related narratives of not only (prospective) adoptive parents, but also adoptees and biological mothers. This I felt made tuning into the experiences a comfortable process.

As a professional I felt that regardless of co-operation, a gap existed between the professionals as a group and the (prospective) adoptive parents. User organizations operate in between the groups, and although the rhetoric is similar to that of the adoption professionals, some user dissatisfaction is also heard. In the adoption field in Finland, the actors are few and there are many collaborative initiatives. Still, I feel that the definition of one's position or 'camp', e.g. professional, adoptive parent or adoptee (less so for biological parents) seems to be very important, and along my research journey I often felt I had to choose sides. This gap between the parties sometimes made me feel uncomfortable. Later in the research, the insider and outsider dilemma manifested in being both a practitioner (social worker) and an academic (researcher), which often resulted in feeling alien in one or other of the camps.

Martinelli Barfoed (2008, 82) also discusses the issue of being an insider or outsider in the adoption community, since a great deal of the adoption researchers themselves are either adoptive parents, or lately adoptees themselves. An insider perspective has been criticized for not addressing critical perspectives of adoption since according to e.g. Alvesson and Deetz (2000), distance is needed when challenging taken-for-granted issues. This caution similarly applies to a professional researching into professional practices. In critical theory, the closeness and distance of the researcher to the studied phenomenon has to be especially considered, since the self-evident is also to be problematized (Alvesson & Sköldberg 1994, 210; Alvesson & Deetz 2000, 188), and this has been one major consideration throughout my research process. Being too involved might lead to a situation where not enough analytical distance is achieved (Alvesson & Deetz 2000; Martinelli Barfoed 2008, 83). I felt this challenge especially in the beginning of the research process, and the dynamics of my closeness and distance to the phenomenon needed to be reconsidered throughout the research.

Along my research process I have been confronted with my different roles and also the emotionality of the issue being studied. Apparently, adoption is a very existential issue, but one that everybody can relate to at some level. I sometimes felt uneasy among other social workers and researchers who were not very familiar with the area of adoptions. As adoption is a middle-class phenomenon, some peers had a tendency to relate to these issues on a personal level and the topic sometimes raised very 'coloured' emotions (commonly taking the stance of one of the parties in the adoption triad). Surprisingly, many of the social workers I met also related more to the adult-driven knowledge order, even though I had intuitively expected them to adopt a child perspective. This has led me to slip into my professional social worker role every now and then, when I was confronted by confrontational questions about why the process is so difficult or why it takes so long from the adult perspective. As a response, I have found myself delivering long monologues about the complex picture of inter-country adoption with all its parties and paradoxes.

The final challenges I want to raise are related to the reporting of this study. The phenomena of inter-country adoption is very broad, as are the related issues of power, emotion, social interaction and satisfaction within social services. The investigation had several theoretical foundations and connections to several disciplines, so one limitation I had to make in this summary was to narrow the presentation of literature down to only those studies which were directly relevant to my study. Further as the

pre-adoption services consist of two very different phases, I have consciously avoided any overt differentiation. Many of the experiences are similar across the process, while some are more weighed towards one of the phases or to specific parts of the adoption process. I also recognized the challenges posed by narrative research and publishing (as addressed by Riessman & Quinney 2005, 398): especially forced data reduction as there is limited space to include excerpts from interviews in journal articles. Therefore, some of the complex phenomena and nuanced analyses which emerge in the research have to be limited in its presentation.

## **7 Conclusions and implications**

The study has conveyed a narrative user perspective, enhanced the understanding of and provided new knowledge on clienthood experiences through pointing at their complexity in the setting of pre-adoption services. This has been done by combining survey and interview data, and by utilizing the overarching conceptual frameworks of emotion, power, social interaction and service satisfaction. This study commenced at a micro-level by analysing data of personal experiences of the pre-adoption process as presented in the original articles.

These findings were then interpreted and explained in relation to the social situation of prospective adoptive parents on both intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, as well as being situated within the wider institutional context of social work and inter-country adoption. The power perspective offered a critical approach to the encounter between prospective adoptive parents as clients within the welfare system, and state control. In this meeting, the issues of private and public are brought to the agenda in a professional context, and form a constant source of tension. The aim of the critical investigation was to make these issues visible in order to raise discussion about associated practices. The study points to the vulnerability created in the situation and the emotions and actions it creates, whilst at the same time offering a possibility for professionals to rethink their professional practices. My aim has been to grow respect and sensitivity in the relationship between the user group and the professionals by analysing the interpersonal level, and not to widen the gaps which have been shown to exist. Through an awareness and analysis of the power dimensions which feature in the relationship, power can be made visible and turned into a productive utility (Uggerhøj 2014, 213).

Article I offered the first study on service satisfaction with adoption services in Finland, and a comprehensive overview on the characteristics of adopters and transnationally adopted children in Finland. This sub-study concluded that most of the former clients within pre-adoption services are satisfied with the service received. As the experiences of former clients were further explored in Articles II-IV, the importance of emotion and power has been advanced. This study has pointed at the importance of acknowledging emotions as important in shaping agency, and hence directly influences the interaction between the client and professional. Furthermore, the importance of the perception of a power asymmetry in terms of either support or control has been highlighted. The effect of these issues on the actions of the prospective adoptive parent have been illustrated through the strategic social interaction of the clients in the institutional setting. In line

with Goffman (1959), I have argued that all social interaction encompasses strategic interaction, and that “putting ones best foot forward” in the pre-adoption services is common and understandable, as is a conforming behaviour and shown to be a beneficial strategy in social services. However, two particular situations foster strategic interaction that can become problematic from the point of view of service delivery, and also the future wellbeing of the adoptive family: firstly the utilization of major information control and emotional inhibition of the clients, and secondly a lack of a joint needs definition by the professionals, which leads to clients seeing them as an obstacle on the road of becoming an adoptive parent. These situations might not only make the attainment of the aim of the services difficult, but also hinder the development of a trustful relationship that is already challenged in the institutional context. The means for improving practices to avoid these issues have been discussed in the articles and in this summary.

The complex interplay of power, emotion and social interaction has been illustrated in the context of pre-adoption services. In the institutional setting of social work, these are all core themes. The study adds both to the scarce number of empirical studies on power and emotion within social work, and the few studies on professional interaction with prospective parents. The study of this user group that is both resourceful and articulate has highlighted important issues that need to be considered in all institutional social work settings.

In this study I have addressed similarities between other social work settings and the pre-adoption services, especially the experiences of biological parents in child protection interventions. As there are many similar experiences among user groups, it is important to stress that these settings have notable differences. In child protection, the potential loss and stake is obviously different, as is the possibility for any exit from the process. Although I have argued that an exit from pre-adoption services might lead to closing the last door to parenthood, a temporary exit or the consideration of other possibilities (e.g. elective childlessness, further infertility treatments, fostering etc.) might still be an option. A client in child protection services facing the threat of having a child removed from their home usually does not have any such options.

As Flyvbjerg (2001, 138) states, most social science research offers either micro-level or macro-level explanations, and has found it difficult to bring these two approaches together. In my analysis of the pre-adoption setting, I have taken into account the impact of different levels of social reality in the analysis of lived experiences. The beginnings of analysis in the articles was from a micro-level perspective, whilst this

summary has aimed at offering a macro-level understanding of the phenomena within the global scene of social work and inter-country adoption. Furthermore, this study offers practical implications for adoption practices both on a local and global level.

The implications of this study can be seen on different levels. On a local level this concerns professional practice and policy in a receiving country, and this broadens to address inter-country adoption on a global level. Six implications are identified on the level of professional practice in the pre-adoption services. These are then followed by further implications: one on national policy level and two on a global level.

Firstly as I have argued that stressful emotions arise from one's own history and personal situation, the relationship and interaction with the professionals, the institutional context and the client position, and the different twists which inevitably occur in the adoption process. This complex interplay calls for understanding from the professionals, and a good interaction between the client and the professional should be tolerant from the professional's side in acknowledging the background of the client's emotion and allowing them to be expressed freely in their interactions. This acknowledgement would foster the development of a supporting relationship and a sense of recognition for the prospective adoptive parent. As de Boer & Coady (2007) note, professionals in good relationships tend to recognize negative emotions as normal in the child welfare setting.

Secondly I claim that in addition to acknowledgement and acceptance, negative emotions are important to alleviate by the professionals, especially in an uncertain and long process. This is important because containing and hiding them might influence the process in many ways. Contained stressful emotions might lead to strategic action that jeopardizes the trustful relationship between client and professional, the prospective adoptive parent's own emotional process might be inhibited, and this might lead to the containment of negative emotions which may later influence parenthood and the delicate attachment with the future child. Finally, containing stressful emotions might hinder any post-adoption support seeking. As Sukula (2009, 88-89) observes: "Who could fail and tell a story about their tiredness or let-down, when one has repeated a story of success throughout the whole process?". In this matter, the notion of the client's personal experience of a sense of power as control or support in the services is crucial for both the emotional and behavioural response. More effort is therefore needed to enable clients to feel secure in the pre-adoption process since the emotional experiences they encounter in their relations with professionals can have long-term consequences for the adoptive family and child.

Thirdly, this study indicates that a space for reflection and emotion expression is needed outside of the controlling context in pre-adoption services. Thus, insecurities are hidden in fear of not proceeding in the process or of facing a termination. The tension between support and control is inevitable in social work, and relative to the different parties involved. A separation of preparation (support) and assessment (control) could be made in the pre-adoption services, and this has been advanced in other Nordic countries, but it again constitutes a risk for an assessment being centred on measurable things such as income, education, housing etc., and thus bringing us back to older administrative methods of assessment, making it instrumental and thin (Triselotis et al. 1997). The evaluation of one's emotional capacity and readiness for adoptive parenthood (especially in a time when children have more special needs) is needed since adoptive parents who yearn to have a child are more often asked to stretch their preferences in regard to the child's age and health, in order to become parents. From the child's point of view, the emotional readiness of potential parents and their capacity to make a truly informed decision needs to be guaranteed. Dumbrill (2006) argues that the separation of supporting and controlling practices is not possible on the part of the professionals, since it is not always the practice or the conduct of the professional that counts, but rather the client's own perception of the nature of power. Noordegraaf et al.'s (2008b) study supports this duality, in that the professional's role in a social work position constantly alters the discussion with a client in pre-adoption services. Instead, the space which is needed can be offered through preparatory courses or other forums for adoptive parents.

Fourthly, user participation should take place in establishing both the needs and aims within the services, as well as in the further development of services which meet them. This requires co-creation and the capacities of flexibility and reflection from the side of the professionals. As Beresford (2012) points out, "participation and user involvement are part of a wider discussion about democracy". As prospective adoptive parents are powerful in many areas of their life, they might not be in as much need of participation in our society as many other client groups, but as they are informed service users, their capacities should be utilized in planning and developing services, as well as in co-defining their own needs. Although there has been a strong rhetoric and agenda of social service user participation, it rarely happens in practice in everyday social work (Uggerhøj 2014, 202) and the impact of user involvement has been modest (Carr 2012; Harris 2012). This would indicate user involvement to be a general problem in social services and not only one that features in adoption services. Hence,



one important notion is that the participatory issue is not merely for the professional to implement, but that it is located on the institutional level (Uggerhøj 2014, 208-210) and needs measures to be taken in terms of policymaking.

Fifthly, on the level of social work practices in the receiving country I propose changing the current risk-oriented discourse into a capability-oriented discourse, in terms of assessing the prospective adoptive parents with the aim to promoting a shared understanding of the aims and true capacities of the clients. When aims are clearly defined and expressed, then no parties' rights are in opposition. As no-one can claim the right to another human being, the aim of the pre-adoption service for the prospective adoptive parents is to be separated from the aim of the whole adoption process. The only aim should be to select and prepare well-suited possible parents and to mediate these possible homes to the children who are available for adoption. However, the prospective adoptive parents' emotional aim and motivation to enter the services will always be to become parents to a child (i.e. to have a child). A further paradox is that this same emotional aim is considered as a sustainable motive for adoptive parenthood (Varilo 1993), since altruism is not usually regarded a stable basis for committed parenthood. This leads to a situation where although the emotional aim of "wanting a child" is "right" in the eyes of the professionals, it also conflicts with the main aim of the professionals, and this will continue to create friction.

Sixth and lastly on this local level, the pre-adoption practices and normative family ideals which guide them have changed surprisingly little in the past years. Still, our society is changing at a rapid pace and the changed diversities in both family life and society are a fact. Hence there should be more consideration given to making room for more flexibility in the assessment criteria, flexibility that is perhaps better suited to a world that is not as stable and predictable as it used to be. Since an emotional readiness and a capacity for parenting are regarded as the most important pre-requisites of adoption according to Finnish social workers in adoption practices (Eriksson 2007), there could be more flexibility in regards to the other requirements that are made. However, this is challenging in inter-country adoption where the sending countries have strict "traditional" criteria based on societal and cultural norms, and which will eventually have the last word in the creation of normative adoptive families.

In addition to these local-level considerations, an implication on the national level is to ensure specific adoption knowledge among the professionals, since the survey data showed a perceived lack in knowledge among social workers, as well as a deficit

in satisfactory preparation for adoptive parents. Since the quality of the service is important, the findings call for centralizing the pre-adoption counselling service into bigger municipal units, with the possibility for adoption expertise to accumulate. At the same time, to ensure high quality post-adoption support for the families, adoption knowledge should be better integrated as a part of the knowledge base in child welfare, in terms of education, research and practice. In Finland, adoption has too often been seen as a separate part of child welfare with loose connections, and something that should be tied together with child protection (as already proposed by Pösö 2003). The Finnish Adoption Act (22/2012) enforced in 2012 acknowledges open adoptions which can be seen a first step in bringing adoption closer to child protection. It further stipulates that social workers offering pre-adoption counselling should have specific expertise in adoption, which should be ensured in the reorganization of social and health services provision on a national level. As Chou and Browne (2008) have demonstrated, those countries that have a high degree of adoptions from abroad are also likely to have many domestic children in state care. Opening up the discussion about domestic adoption from care in Finland could also change the discourse of adoption to become more of an issue of child protection than reproduction, and social problems which are closer to ourselves being seen and acknowledged.

Finally, on a global level, more emphasis and effort should be made in improving the assessment of children's needs, in order to truly promote adoption as a form of global child protection. Whereas the prospective parents are well assessed, the assessment of children in inter-country adoption is not always as thorough. According to Ward (1997), matching in adoption often resembles a gamble and McRoy (1999) claims that the matching of special needs children usually is based on the willingness of the prospective parents to accept the child. This is very true in inter-country adoptions where insecurity and long waiting periods lead to the prospective adoptive parents stretching their preferences, sometimes to an extreme. As Crea (2012) points out, the families' expectations and capabilities of becoming parents to children with greatly varying needs are often not well enough addressed in the pre-adoption process. Still, the prime focus in matching should be a true needs assessment of the child, which is then matched with a realistic capabilities assessment of the prospective parents.

As a concluding implication and area for further research, I suggest that in line with the globalization of social work (Lyons 2006), a more genuine co-operation between the sending and receiving country serves the child's best interests. One of the greatest

challenges in working with inter-country adoption is the geographical distance and fragmented process. Since the services offered to the different parties (the prospective adoptive parents, the child, and the biological parents) are separated, the pre-adoption process in the receiving country easily becomes adult-driven and alien to the whole idea of adoption as a child protection intervention. Therefore a dialogue between social workers and other professionals in the sending and receiving countries should be promoted. This would benefit the child through matching being done co-operatively, which in turn would utilize the knowledge of professionals in both countries and bring the child's true needs into focus. Today, genuine co-operation has no technical obstacles, and although e.g. video conferences could prove useful, cultural, language, institutional and legal barriers are still likely to exist. However, an effort of this type would be a step closer to achieving true global child protection with the child at its centre, compared to the matching which is being done based solely on documents, and which is pursued in many countries today. This would also require that an individual needs assessment be properly carried out for each child, and be matched with the capacities of the future adoptive parent(s). So, instead of empty jargon, research is needed on how global inter-country adoption could undergo a true change in practices to becoming more child-centred, and in line with the Hague Convention of 29<sup>th</sup> May 1993 on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption.

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